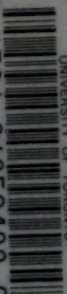


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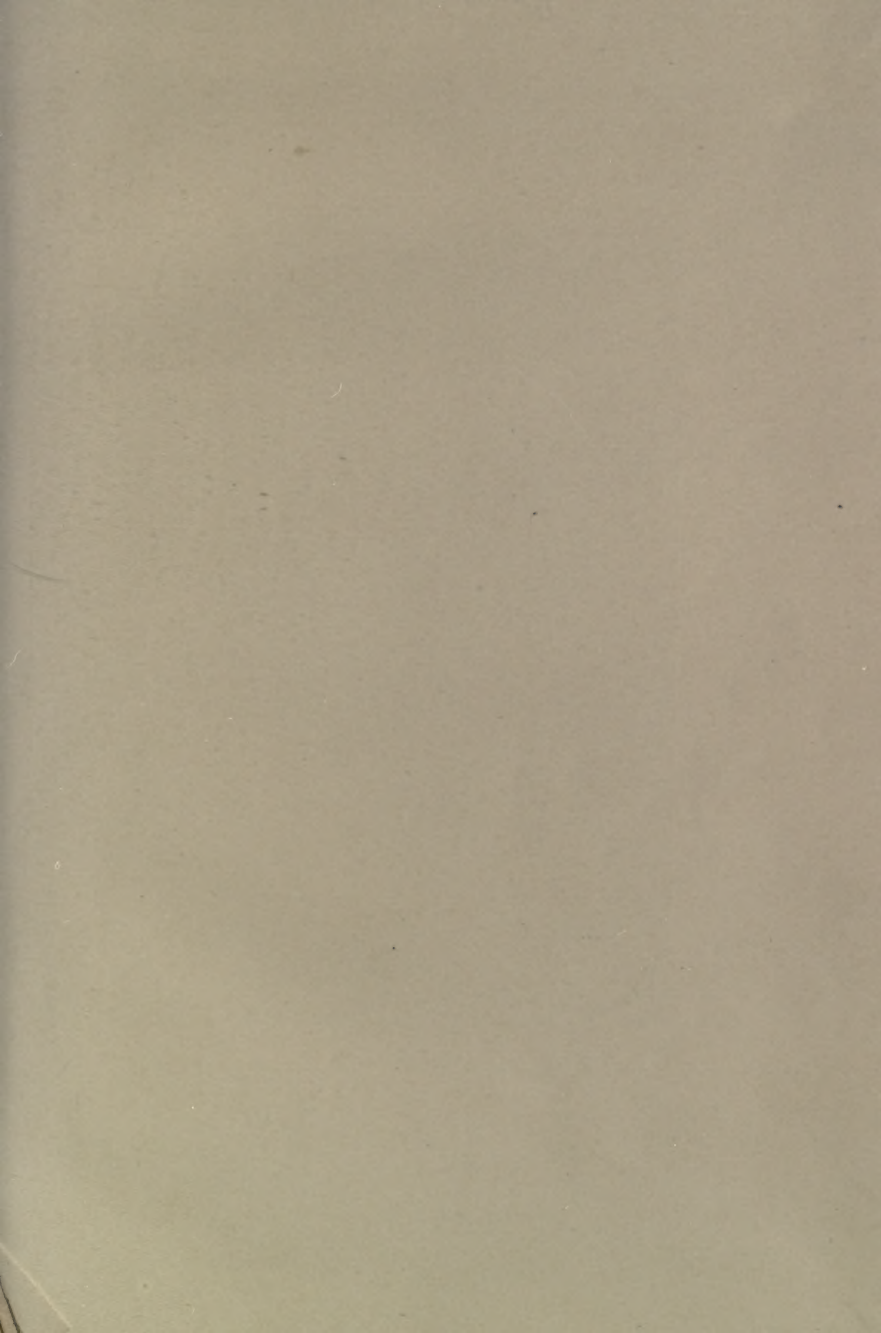
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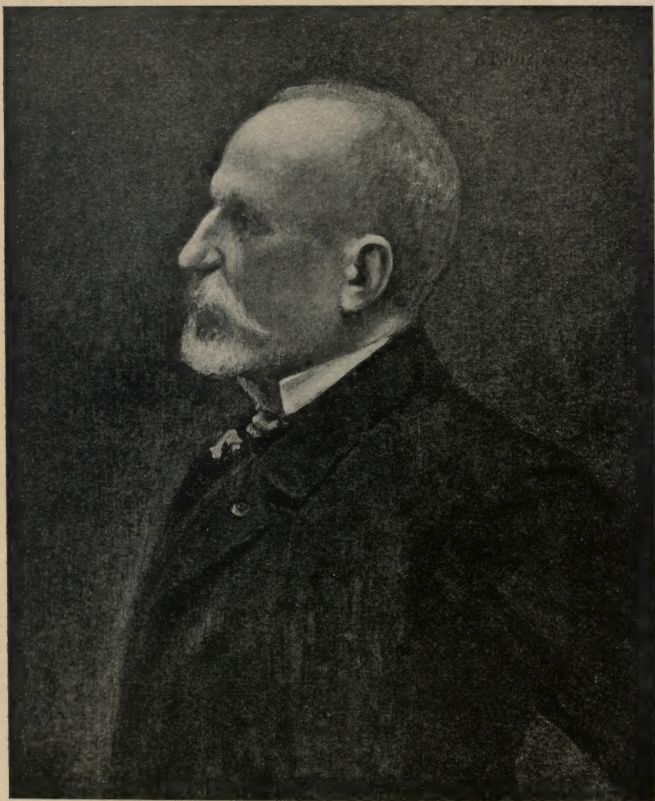
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I. PUVIS DE CHAVANNES.



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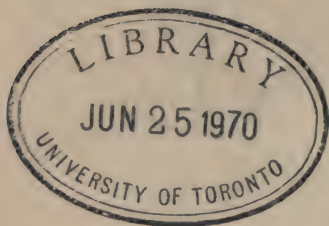
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PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

(1824—1898)

THE portrait reproduced in the first plate in this little volume might well be taken as the most direct comment upon it; it is the most natural introduction. Here, depicted exactly as he was to us who knew and loved him in the portrait painted "da Medesimo" for the Uffizi Gallery, is the creator of so many great pictures which, much reduced though still recognizable and compelling, are here considered. It was those clear, steady eyes that saw the satisfying and luminously lovely visions that restored French art to the empire of idealism, which was even more compromised by the writings of some of its champions than by the most furious onslaughts of those who most fervently denied it; it was in the mind behind the pure lofty brow, in the sound uncontaminated will, the calmly creative brain that was even mistress of itself that they slowly took shape. There is nothing in his dress, his attitude or the setting of the portrait to betray the "artist" and the "painter." His bearing is that of a correct and rather "distant" gentleman, erect, supple and slim in his tight-fitting frock-coat, with the significant stiffness of the shoulders that he often gave to his ideal figures; there is nothing, not a single detail to "localize" the portrait in which every feature is strongly marked (particularly the nose which Puvis de Chavannes himself called "colossal" when he sent me his photograph for the "*Revue d'art Viennoise*") and yet even in the closeness and preciseness of the individual resemblance the master's generalizing temper of mind is clearly to be seen. The whole man is in the portrait.

It was painted in 1887. He was sixty-three; he was working on the Sorbonne cartoon; he was at the very height of his career, in full possession of his genius; he could with confident serenity look back, and from the threshold of his old age consider the imposing series of his pictures, which had for so long been misunderstood, though henceforth they were to be universally acclaimed. I may be permitted perhaps to go back in memory and to state that it was not until that time, to be exact, at the beginning of 1888, that I made his acquaintance. Before that, beginning with May 8, 1881, when he wrote me a few lines in his admirable handwriting (as beautiful as that of Racine and José-Maria de Hérédia) thanking me for an article I wrote in "Le Parlement" on "Le Pauvre Pêcheur," I had received many previous tokens of his gratitude after various battles waged in defence of his art; but we had never met. After a correspondence of several years he wrote to me: ". . . after such energetically expressed appreciation as yours I would much have liked to know you personally and I have more than once felt an impulse to contrive it; but, not to speak of my dread of trespassing on your kindness, I am also conscious of a rare delicacy in such relationships in which an artistic sympathy is enough to set up a current, which on my side at any rate, I feel to be very near affection. . . ."

It was left for Cazin to introduce us at a monthly dinner presided over by Puvis de Chavannes (and christened, I believe, by Jean Béraud, with a compromising play on words, in no wise justified by the sobriety of the guests or the bill of fare, the "rum-dinner" (pris de rhum because there was not a single Prix de Rome among the members!) and so to establish a personal relation between

the then illustrious master and the humble writer on art, who, from his earliest years, had had the most fervent admiration for him. We were already friends—if such a word can properly be used to describe a relationship between men of such unequal ages and quality—when we met.

One needs to have participated in those jovial gatherings in which for several years painters, sculptors, musicians, and men of letters met every month under his chairmanship—one needs to have seen him in his genial good humour and good fellowship, tempered always with his sound common sense, to understand how he has been caricatured in the pen-portraits of the long-haired æsthetes and neo-mystics, the scullions let loose from the kitchens of Montsalvat, which appeared during the last years of his life. . . . Without attempting any analysis of his work, which will be amply set before the reader in M. Jean Laran's notes, I would like to show in a few words how his work really belongs to the greatest French traditions, how, logically, it came at its appointed hour, and how we Frenchmen found in it and championed our "Ideal" against the stifling formulæ of the academies, and the naturalists who denied it, and the perverts and charlatans who profaned it.

The mere mention of the word Ideal seems to upset certain minds. It has been so horribly abused æsthetically, it has been burdened with meanings so widely diverse in the jargon of the schools, that it can only be used with extreme caution. As a matter of fact all art, by its very existence, is ideal, since it can only exist by the intervention of man following a directing and organizing idea. The simplest still-life study may contain

as much and more spiritual essence than the most complicated allegory; a painter's most delicate shades of sensibility can be revealed in it, and as between one man and another, the personal equation, to adopt the language of the astronomers, is subject to incessant modification, every piece of nature reflected in different eyes and minds will take on a new aspect, and reflect an intimacy, an ideal, which must be renewed at every attempt.

The higher and more complicated the nature of the subject, the greater becomes the number of possible styles and variations, and, through portraiture and historical painting, we come to great decorative painting in which desire and will become more conscious and more imperiously demand the expression through the object, form or theme represented, something beyond them, an inward "motive," an idea, a superior harmony—and that is the very region of idealism, in its more special meaning, though it must always be conditioned by the nature and demands of the language of paint, to which one might apply the saying of Newton: "Let Physics beware of Metaphysics."

When Puvis de Chavannes appeared on the scene, people were still wrangling about the ideal, meaning the scholastic ideal, as it had been defined, following Quatremère de Quincy, by the academic æsthetics. The Beautiful, with a capital B, "Absolute Beauty," "Sovereign Beauty,"—those were the words written by Eugène Delacroix, the conscientious, though sometimes astonished, pupil of Guérin, in one of his notebooks, one day when he had been made to "reconcile a negro's face with the profile of Antinoüs" and the same model's Luce with the "palette of the Atrides"; as

Raffet said: "The ugly, absolute ugliness, these are our conventions . . . these are our fancy heads and fancy wrinkles. . . ." Between the classics grouped round Ingres in his old age, whom they set up on a pedestal without in the least understanding him, and the last of the romantics, old, discouraged, decimated—amongst whom Th. Couture, a skilful though ponderous craftsman, full of precepts and prescriptions for good painting, most of them picked up from Decamps, tried to codify his confused and blundering experiments, a new generation, a new school (or mob) had arisen, who were equally violent in their opposition to their old and their new adversaries. These were the realists who followed Courbet in saying: "If you want me to paint goddesses, show me some!" But above all—outside the doctrinaries of every party, as a logical and wholesome consequence of their naïve intimacy with unspoiled nature—the landscape painters were beginning to exercise a decisive influence on modern painting. The artist's vision, falsified by so many theories, prejudices and formulæ was being classified, stripped, illuminated; artists were beginning to understand that the bituminous backgrounds of the one party, or the tubes of starch of the other were not indispensable to the art of painting, to the emotions, or to the ideal. "The innocent clear light of day" by its entry into the art of painting, dissipated many phantoms. . . . When we consider certain water-colours like the "Birth of the Muses," or certain sketches for the "Golden Age," it would seem that even Ingres himself had understood this or had a presentiment of it.

After a period of hesitation between Delacroix and

Courbet, Puvis, no doubt following Chassériau, found the royal road along which his genius was to travel. Already in Couture's studio, where he worked for a time, he had made certain instructive experiments. Although he was never very ready to talk of his apprenticeship and his early attempts, he told me that one day, on a grey autumn morning while he was painting from the model, the master, coming up to his easel, scolded him for his anæmic painting and began to tell him how to get the flesh tints, which he seemed to be ignoring altogether. Though he had not yet broken away, and was not yet certain of what he was doing, Puvis was quite sure that he had no use for the prescription. The art of making sauces is no doubt very valuable and is not to be despised; but in his heart of hearts he had something else to satisfy, a more intimate ideal to cherish.

It will be seen how he began to become conscious of it about 1859. One evening when I was speaking about his "Retour de Chasse," which I had just seen in the Marseilles museum he said to me—I can still hear him—"Ah! on that day I felt that I was going to have water to swim in all around me!" And it was on that day that the real Puvis de Chavannes was born.

It is not my business here to follow the development of his work, the growing freedom of his ideas, the foundation of his style, since the reader can do that much better for himself by considering the pictures here reproduced. When Ferdinand Brunetière in a famous lecture congratulated the painter of "Ludus pro Patria" and "Inter Artes et Naturam" on having released "the ideal element in painting" from the "game of colours" I do not quite understand, and I am not sure that he himself was

very clear as to what he meant—unless he was trying to say that in proportion as he became more clearly conscious of his vocation, and could more definitely interpret his own heart and mind, Puvis simplified, purified and, as it were, spiritualized his painting. Now his mind was in its most intimate essence, in its workings and aspirations absolutely “classical,” completely mistress of form and composition and regular rhythmic harmony, organized for the satisfaction of eyes and mind—though within the limitations and subject to the means at the disposal of the plastic language of paint.

Brunetière therefore was right in praising Puvis for having resorted “more even than to modelling, to inward meditation and the harmony of detail, and the idea of the whole composition, the poetic significance of his subject.” But perhaps he attached a rather dangerous meaning (from the painter’s point of view) to his eloquent and noble eulogy, when he added that Puvis must above all be praised for having “understood that the imitation of Nature could not be the aim and end of painting, and that, as Pascal said, if we are to admire imitations of things which in themselves we do not admire, the artist’s mind must have found in it something hidden, intimate and ulterior which is not revealed to the vulgar gaze.”

The scullions to whom I alluded above twisted Brunetière’s words to their own uses; they saw, or pretended to see, in Puvis a great initiate, a revealer of the “Sense of Mystery,” the wonderful mystery of which they pretended to have the key, though, for reasons that have never been explained, like the turkey in the fable, they have never been able to make it very clear. No, Puvis

had no thought of disentangling any "ulterior" or "hidden" or esoteric meaning from Nature. There was in his art no incantation, no open sesame other than penetration, the mastery of Nature by a lofty powerful mind, sensitive to rhythm, beauty, force, grandeur, eloquence, recreating for the uses of our hearts and minds, amid a world of uncertainty and ruin, a world of harmony. Was not this also the achievement, in his own day and in his own manner, of Nicolas Poussin? Was not this the work of all our great classics, from the builders of the cathedrals to J. B. Corot? "Novelty in painting," wrote Poussin, "does not consist in the representation of an entirely new subject, but in the honest and new handling of the means of expression; a subject becomes new and strange where before it was common and overlaid. Invention in an art consists of thinking in that art; it is the discovery of the harmonies proper to that art."

Coming at a time when classicism had fallen into disrepute by having allowed the letter to take precedence of the spirit and forgotten the way to the eternal source of truth, Puvis de Chavannes, a worthy compatriot of Bossuet and Buffon, turned to account what the landscape painters had brought into French art, came into touch with Nature, whose familiar graces and sovereign rhythm he united both in his eclogues and his epics, and responded, just when we most needed it, to the unexpressed and vague expectations of all those who were dreaming of great destinies for our natural art, and could not throw in their lot with the superficial formalism of the neo-classics or the lateral and limited realism of the "copyists" of "slices of life." He re-

stored the imagination of the French to the straight, broad road. May those who have followed his example never slumber under the drowsy syrup of dreams, nor lose themselves in a maze of subtle meanings: but may they be worthy of the master and, without repetition of his work, contemplate Nature, and, so to speak, store her up in their minds, and seek the "virtue" of their art in the profound harmony of their instincts, their hearts, and their will.

ANDRE MICHEL

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

THERE has not yet been published any book dealing fully and exhaustively with the artist's life and work. A monograph by M. Léonce Bénéдите is in course of preparation, but meanwhile there is a very useful little study by M. Marius Vachon (Paris, 1895. Illustrated; new and revised edition 1900). There is also a long interview written by M. Thiébauld Sisson in "Le Temps," January 16, 1895, and there is a series of letters recently published, with notes by M. Conrad de Mandarin and M. L. Wehrlé ("Revue de Paris," December 15, 1910, and February 1, 1911). We have had the advantage of certain information hitherto unpublished kindly supplied by M. Paul Baudouin and M. Victor Koos.

PLATE II. PIETA

THE artistic career of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes began very modestly at the Salon of 1850—a beginning thoroughly in harmony with his “perfectly simple” life, which contained so little in the nature of marvellous surprises or dramatic episodes. “Simple” was the painter’s own expression, and is characteristic of the sound common sense which protected him from his too zealous admirers.

He was comfortably provided for by his family, so that he was able, at his leisure, to follow a vocation which came late in life. About 1847, when he was twenty-three, he was working in Henri Scheffer’s studio, then in Delacroix’s, and then, for three months, in Couture’s. But none of these masters could tempt him to become one of those industrious pupils who progress steadily from medals to prizes, from prizes to medals, and in due course attain the higher ranks of their profession. He was isolated and something of an amateur when, at twenty-six, he sent in his first picture to the Salon of 1850.

The picture was accepted; and it is hard to discern in it the personality of Puvis de Chavannes. His dramatic sense and his technique are still under the influence of Delacroix. However, it was not by chance that the artist had taken a serious and moving subject, and was less concerned with displaying his skill as a painter than with evoking a strong and noble emotion.

There was no affectation about his ingenuousness, and he has himself told, with his usual geniality, how he was forced to realize his want of experience on varnishing day. “With a fair amount of success I had painted

a 'Pieta,' " he wrote to M. Vachon. " The Dead Christ lying on the knees of the Virgin, with the Magdalen kneeling by His side. I was delighted at having it accepted, and on the opening day I went very early in the morning to see myself in my work. When I stood in front of it, what did I see? Only two figures instead of three! I was amazed, and went close to the picture and saw, to my dismay, that my purple-clad virgin was entirely lost in the background, which in my ignorance I had painted violet. . . . From that moment I perceived the value of tone in colour. Only from that day on was I a painter."



II. PIETA.

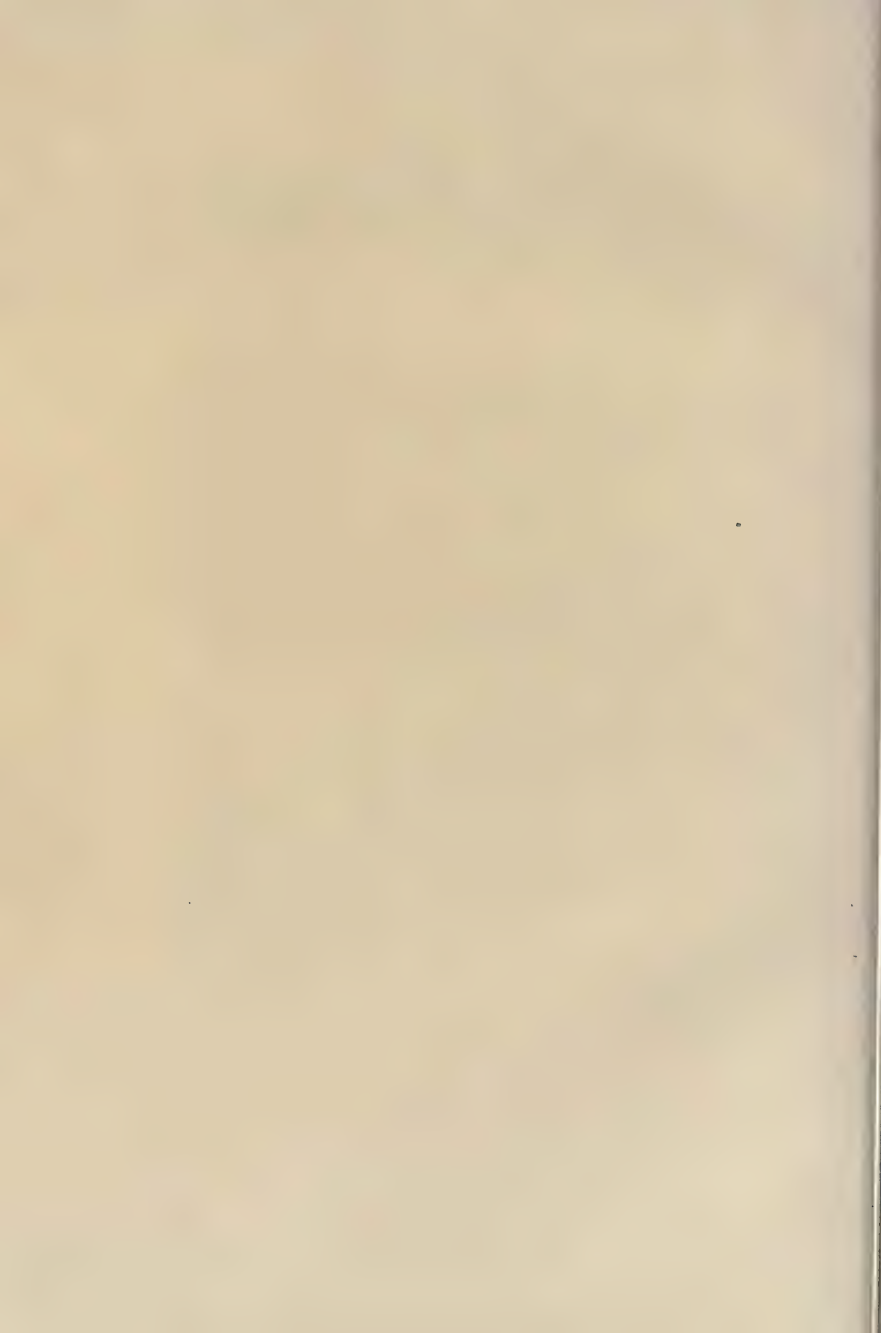


PLATE III. LES POMPIERS DE VILLAGE (VILLAGE FIREMEN)

THE years following this first success were not so happy.

By way of consolation for his successive refusals at the Salon, year after year, he had to be sure the example of almost all the great artists of his day—Delacroix, Rousseau, Millet, Corot, Dupré, Barye, Troyon, Courbet—all of whom had for years been rejected by the jury, and were even at that time occasionally refused, in spite of the increasing protests of critics and connoisseurs. But in spite of such illustrious precedents it was discouraging to be excluded from the Salon at a time when an artist had hardly any opportunity of making himself known outside the official exhibitions. And when Courbet, for instance, took the initiative and in 1855 organized a private exhibition of his work, it was regarded as an ambitious challenge and rather bad taste. In his dilemma Puvis took part in a private exhibition in the Bonne-Nouvelle galleries about this time, but he seems only to have met with a success of laughter.

The titles of the pictures disdained by the jury or the public at this time clearly demonstrate the young painter's uncertainty, for he is here wavering between religious art and historical painting, between classical subjects and realistic art. Among them we may mention "Mademoiselle de Sombreuil buvant un verre de Sang pour sauver son Père" (1850,) "Jean Cavalier au chevet de sa mère mourante" (Jean Cavalier at his mother's death-bed), playing the choral of Luther on a bass fiddle, while the dying woman, with a Bible on her bosom, is

gazing at the sky through an open window (1851), an "Ecce Homo," now in the church at Sampagnat (Saône et Loire) (1852), a "Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian," "Julia" returning in the morning to the house of her husband, Agrippa, a "Meditation," a "Herodiad," and finally a curious picture called "Les Pompiers de Village" (Village Firemen), one of the chief figures of which is drawn in the accompanying sketch, the curé hurrying to the fire with a ladder on his shoulder (1857). In 1852 he settled in the studio in the Place Pigalle, which he never left, and there he was surrounded by a few tried friends like Bida, Ricard, and Pollet the engraver. Puvis bravely went on with his invariably ill-received efforts, never doubting that some day Fortune would reveal to him his road to Damascus.



III. LES POMPIERS DE VILLAGE. (Village Firemen).

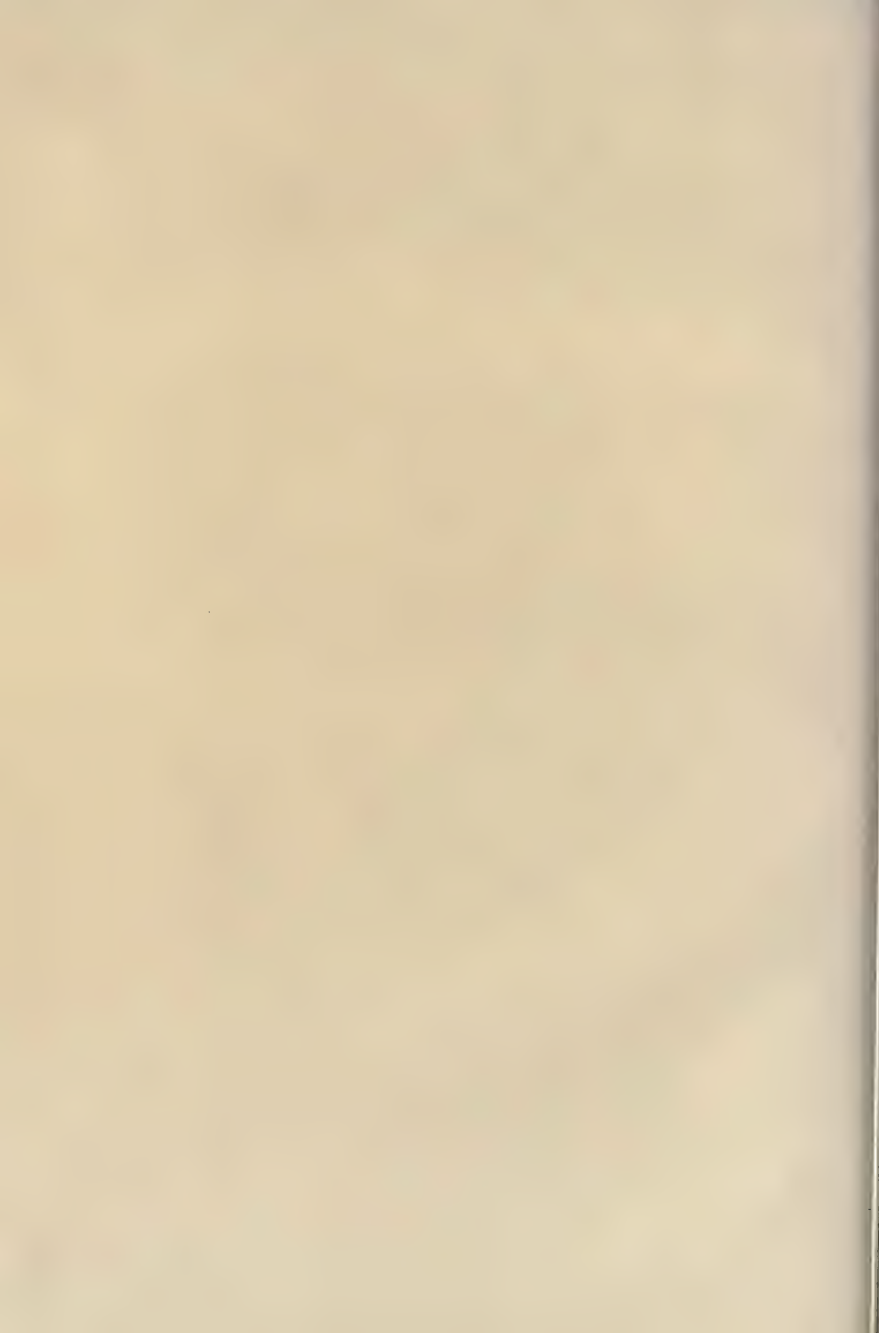


PLATE IV. LE RETOUR DE CHASSE (THE RETURN FROM THE CHASE)

IN 1854 the artist's brother built a country house in Saône-et-Loire, and Puvis offered to paint the walls of the large dining-room. He painted panels of the Four Seasons "slightly modernized," and for his central picture painted the Return of the Prodigal, "with the usual fatted calf."

"It was a piece of impudence on my part," he wrote twenty years later to a friend, "and my family must have been torn between fear and pride. Think of it; a beautiful dining-room in an entirely new style!

"No doubt if I had it to do again I should do it better; but, as a beginning in decorative art, it was not bad. At any rate it showed me the way to my road to Damascus."

It was, in fact, this episode, told with so much humour and simplicity, that put an end to Puvis's hesitation. One of the Four Seasons, repainted and enlarged, was sent to the Salon of 1859, with the title: "Un Retour de Chasse, a fragment of a mural painting," and, on this occasion, the jury were complacent.

It is not only this return to favour that makes this picture one of the important landmarks in the artist's career. In its noble elegance and jocund youth the picture is worthy of the master, and his hand is shown in the style of the drawing, the simplified modelling, and the slender bare trees in the background, such trees as he always loved in their rather pitiful grace. Finally, and above all, it is in this "Retour de Chasse" that Puvis seems first to have become fully conscious of his mission as a decorator.

"M. Puvis de Chavannes," wrote Gautier some years later, "is not a painter of pictures. He does not need the easel, but scaffolding and large wall spaces. His sense of ornament and decoration is shown even in the smallest details. . . . In an age of prose and realism this young man is naturally epic and monumental."

Unfortunately there were few opportunities for a young unknown artist to try his hand on "large wall spaces." About this time he was given a chance of painting four symbolical figures: Fantasy, Vigilance, Dreams, and Poetry, for the house of Mme Claude Vignon, but, failing official commissions, he had himself to plan and execute the two large pictures which were finally to attract public attention.



IV. LE RETOUR DE CHASSE. (Return from the Chase.)

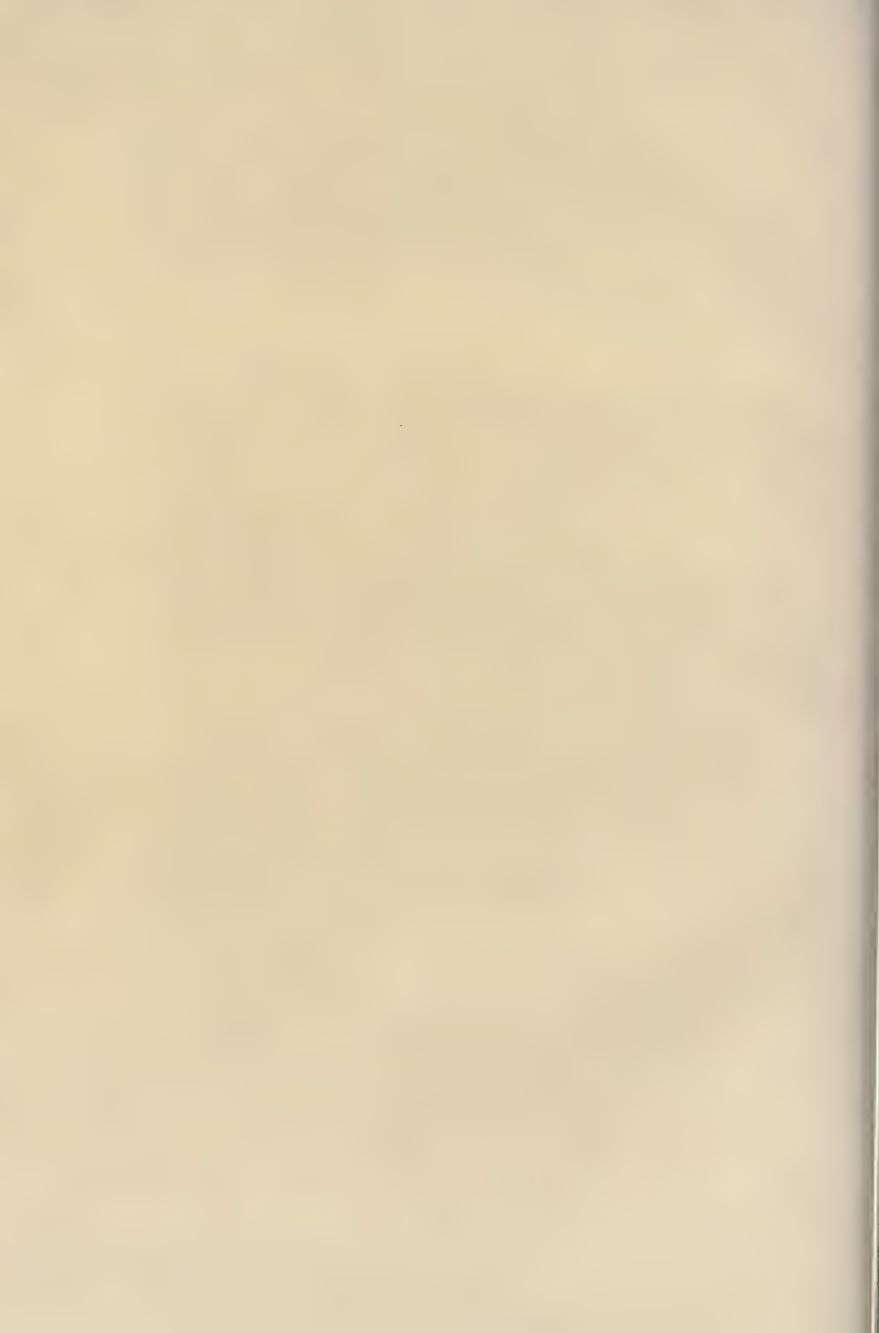


PLATE V. CONCORDIA

" **A**LTHOUGH M. Puvis de Chavannes has already exhibited a 'Retour de Chasse,' full of splendid promise," wrote Gautier in his article on the Salon of 1861, "his career may really be said to have begun this year. He has suddenly emerged from obscurity: the light of success is upon him, and will never leave him. His success has been very great, to the immense credit of the public."

When "Concordia" and "Bellum" appeared it was impossible for anyone to remain indifferent. The first especially, with its full serene harmony, its curtain of cypress trees with doves flying towards them, its flowering laurels, the murmuring little cascades of the stream, the lovely Elysian scene shut off by the unscalable ramparts of high mountains (as Maxime du Camp said), moved everybody who was not impervious to poetry. Gautier, Paul de Saint-Victor, Olivier Merson, Banville, Delécluze, all wrote enthusiastic articles, though in all of them there was a little hesitation.

Not only those who sided against the artist, like Charles Blave, Castagnary, Timbal, but also his admirers were disagreeably surprised by the colour of these pictures. They were, it was said, rather faintly tinted cartoons than pictures, faded frescoes, old tapestry.

"The tones of reality," said Olivier Merson more kindly, "are softened or rather washed out, bathed in a silvery tender atmosphere, breathing a perfectly serene air, giving the figures the appearance of immortal beings gathered together to symbolize the charm, sweetness and peace of existence in Elysium." But even Olivier Merson was a little perturbed by the idea that Puvis

could have adopted his pale colouring deliberately and not for exceptional purposes.

Perhaps with greater reason exception was taken to a sort of disharmony in the modelling of the various figures. Beside the two women with their backs turned towards the spectator—who were generally admitted to be admirable—some of the other figures seemed to be rather perfunctory and incomplete.

Gautier took these reservations at their true value: "And criticism! You say that I have found nothing to criticize and that M. Puvis de Chavannes is therefore perfect? Not by any means! No. But here is a budding painter. We must not kill him out of hand. Let us suffer him to go his own way. We will criticize him later—when he has nothing but qualities."

Concordia won a second medal for Puvis. It was bought by the State for 6,000 francs and is now in the Picardy Museum.



V. CONCORDIA.

PLATE VI. BELLUM

THIS picture is now in the main gallery of the Picardy Museum and is hung as a pendant to Concordia, with which it appeared in the Salon of 1861. The artist gave it to the citizens of Amiens so that the two pictures should not be separated when Diet the architect had made room for the first in the recently completed building.

It was not bought by the State only because it was generally considered to be inferior to Concordia, and perhaps the general opinion was right. As Maxime du Camp observed, the subject was less suited to Puvis's style: "It is difficult to reconcile calmness with violence."

The artist had avoided the difficulty by choosing the moment which follows the fighting and the affray, when the horizon is filled with the thick tragic smoke of burned cities and crops and among the prisoners and the wounded the victors sound their triumphant blare of trumpets.

That the painter handled the victors magnificently was universally admitted. "Fortunately" wrote Paul de Saint-Victor "there is an admirable group in the barren waste of this picture, a group which makes it great. . . . There are three horsemen clad in skins, all together raising their long trumpets to the sky and sounding the brazen note of victory. Nothing could be more grandiose than these three trumpeters."

But Puvis's technique was still at fault. The figures are placed together without any real or necessary interrelation. They are separated into little groups of three, as Olivier Merson said, and each group lives in a different atmosphere. More than that there are several colour schemes, several systems of modelling and drawing in

this decorative mosaic, and it is easy to understand Thoré's anxiety lest, in spite of all the promise of his talent, Puvis de Chavannes should not succeed in finding himself and breaking away from the reminiscences necessarily created by this sort of conventional symbolism, and his doubt as to whether he would have genius and original power enough to "renew the personnel and stock-in-trade of the old allegorical theatre."



VI. BELLUM.

PLATE VII. LE TRAVAIL (WORK)

PUVIS'S style became more definite in the Salon of 1863, in his two new pictures "Le Travail" and "Le Repos," which are inseparable from the two preceding pictures and are now in the same gallery. It would seem that in their more ample and more masterly grouping, and in their simpler and larger harmony of colour—a few clear and delicate tones on a dark blue ground—these two pictures ought to have been welcomed as a manifest advance. But the taste of the public was behind that of the artist, and the critics, who, in 1861 had assigned him a place on the Capitol, in 1863 condemned him to the Tarpeian rock, as Hector de Callias said.

It had been said that Puvis was more a thinker than a painter. This misapprehension grew and was made an excuse for a long discussion of the ideas of his pictures. Castagnary found fault with him for not having represented work in its "rational and absolute unity." The woman giving her breast to the new-born child was only regarded as a "woman in travail" introduced into a corner of the picture as a bad pun. The splendid tranquil actions of the workers were regarded as a mere paradox. "These smiths," said Saint-Victor, among others, "are standing asleep round their anvil. Such workmen would take months to make a girder and a whole day to forge a nail. . . ."

Abuse of abstraction, lack of physical health and individual life, exaggerated fore-shortening in drawing, figures reduced to silhouettes, grey atmosphere, airless, lightless landscapes, such are the defects pointed out by the majority of writers. They even went so far as to deny

the painter's personality. "It seems to me," wrote Arthur Stevens, "that any artist who had will, judgment, erudition and intelligence, and no greatness of character, could paint such pictures as these by studying the Renaissance painters and examining the prints in the Engravings Department."

It is noteworthy, however, that even the most grudging of the critics did, unconsciously, show a very significant deference. "M. Puvis's pictures" said Arthur Stevens in conclusion, "are great in manner and shapely and beautiful to the eye. I fancy he works only for his own satisfaction and I commend him for it, for the man who is not the servant of his work, who works for fame and reward, or even more pitifully, for money, shuts himself off from good and well-being and weakens his forces."



VII. LE TRAVAIL. (Work.)

PLATE VIII. LE REPOS (REST)

THE figures in "Le Travail" were not working hard enough for the public. To balance that opinion no doubt they thought the figures in "Le Repos" were not sufficiently restful. Do people rest standing up?

Let us turn to the conscientious Paul Mantz for less cavilling appreciation. "Le Repos," he said, "is a gathering of shepherds round an old herdsman, who, full of years and memories, is telling his young auditors legends of old days. The figures are simple, but they are beautiful, and under the brush of any other painter they might have been sufficient.

"Unfortunately, M. Puvis de Chavannes has adopted a sort of shorthand technique and an arbitrary system of colouring which robs his figures of reality. His landscapes alone have any vigour: the background to the group of figures in this picture is satisfying to the imagination, if not to the eye, by the grandeur of its nobly balanced lines. But the inward modelling of the figures can hardly be said to exist. . . . And to this inadequacy must be traced the absolute absence of movement and life. . . . The women's bodies are pure abstractions: they are expressed only in colourless masses, or rather in a sort of plastery white, which makes holes in the picture and entirely destroys perspective and probability. The eye of the spectator is lost in the distances which are quite irrationally arranged, for, as regards light and effect, everything is systematized. M. Puvis ignores sun and shadow; he knows nothing of night and day; his scenes are set in the veiled light of limbo and beneath its diffused rays everything fades away and is lost.

Since M. Puvis is so lacking in colour, reality, and life he ought, like Cornelius or Kaulbach, to be content with black and white cameos and monochrome cartoons. . . . But M. Puvis de Chavannes has a distinctive feeling for line, and even when they are led astray, we cannot but admire and love such ambitions as his."

It goes without saying that the general severity was shared by the purchasing committee. "Le Repos" and "Le Travail" were left in the artist's studio until the day when Diet, the architect, came and asked him for two more of his pictures for the staircase of the Picardy Museum. The municipality had not the money to buy them and with his usual disinterestedness, Puvis made them a present of these two pictures.



VIII. LE REPOS. (Rest.)

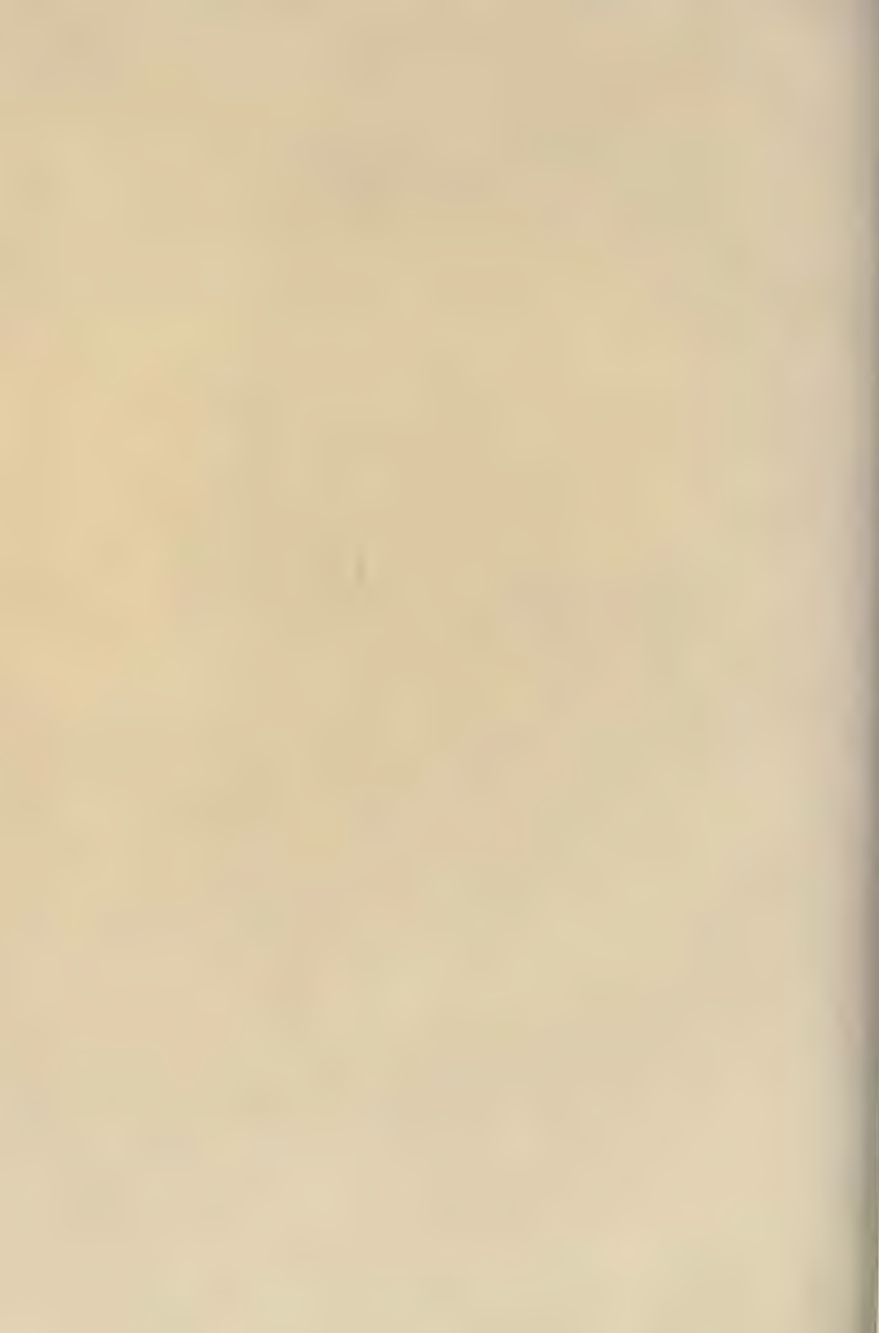


PLATE IX. DESSIN POUR LE REPOS (A DRAWING
FOR LE REPOS)

"**D**O you know a single artist in love with his art," wrote Puvis in 1861, "who has in him the marvellous balm which is called composure? . . . To me composure is a near neighbour of conceit. . . . With a love of beautiful things, I fall into moments of incredulity, ignorance and division of mind, . . . in spite of the inevitable onslaughts of others or of my own nature . . ., without the smallest material or moral encouragement, . . . with no protection from my accomplishment which is very far indeed from its height. . . . I am then filled with an ineffable love for study, and the perfecting of the little knowledge that I have in the direction which is preferable to me."

We have even better proof than this written confession of the blind struggle between the inward force driving the artist on to his goal and the doubts which assail him in the moment of realization.

Thanks to certain exhibitions of his drawings, going as far back as 1886, and also to the gifts by his heirs to the various museums, (the Luxembourg, the Petit-Palais, Amiens, Lyons, Marseilles, Rouen) we are able to follow the sustained efforts of the marvellous draughtsman who was so often accused of carelessness and inexperience.

His work took shape slowly in a series of rough sketches, followed by powerful red-chalk drawings, like that of the two men here reproduced, which was a part of the preparation of the "Repos" at Amiens, and in these every figure was built up with as much power as sensibility. After this stage it was only left to make these

fragments live in the general life of the picture. Every detail is cast and re-cast before it will fit in with the general effect. The man sharpening a scythe in the drawing changed that employment for netting. His companion, whose pose and muscular development are no doubt exaggerated, was replaced by a beautiful young woman whose long lithe figure and pearly skin are now resplendent in the foreground of the picture.

Every figure, every note must justify its presence in the picture, and it is no less instructive to see what Puvis discovers gradually in his studies than what he mercilessly sacrifices later on if the higher interest of the picture demands it. "The smallest hint of a stop-gap," said he to M. Vachon, "is enough to bring the whole thing toppling down by making the eye suspicious and distrustful; an insignificant detail, if it be alien to the parent idea, is enough to destroy the whole force of the emotion."



IX. DRAWING FOR LE REPOS.

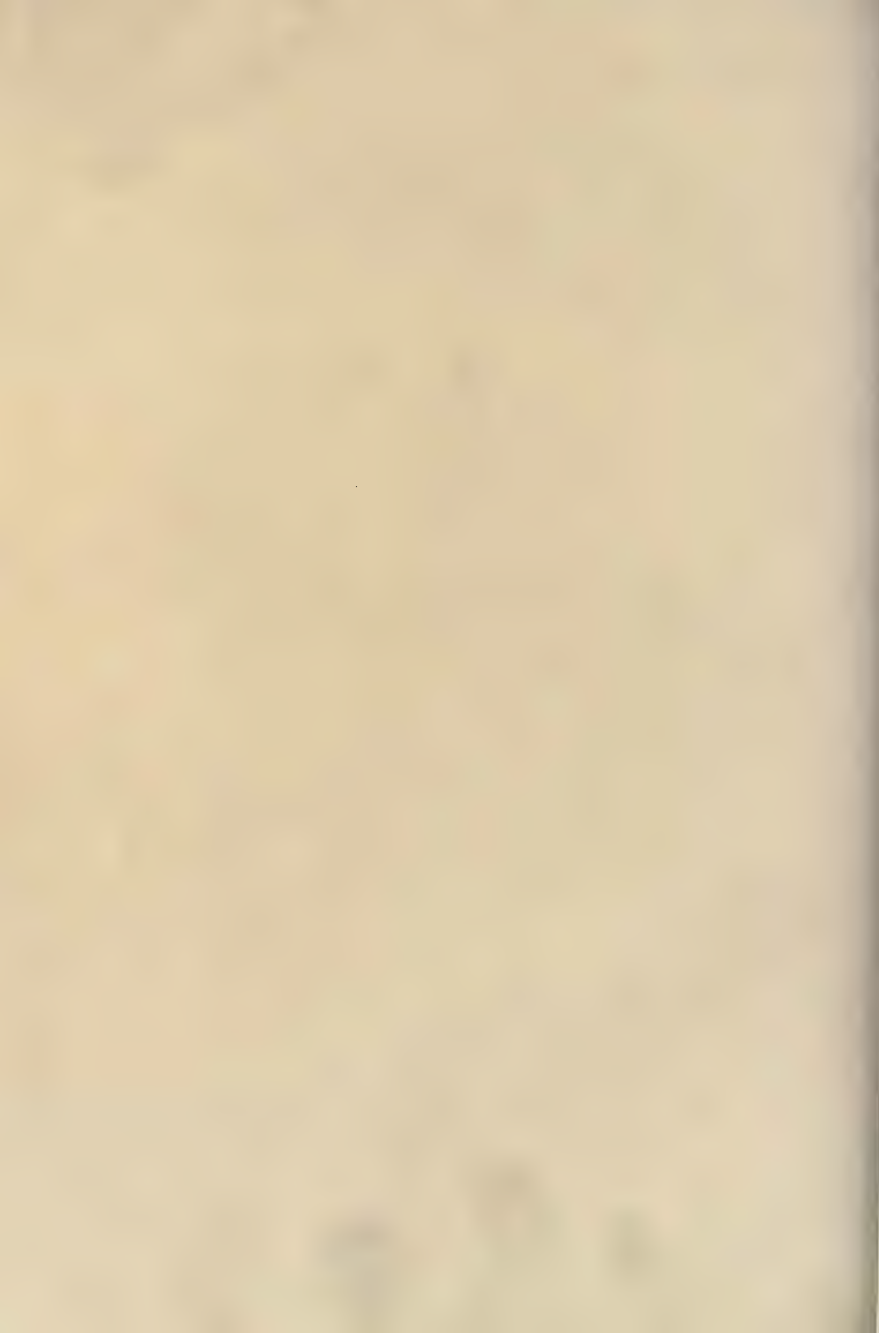


PLATE X. L'AUTOMNE (AUTUMN)

IN the Salon of 1864 the artist regained the ground he had lost and public opinion was generally favourable. In those far-off days the critics used to make a prolonged study of the pictures they had to judge. They did not think they had disposed of a painter when they had pinned on to him one of the five or six formulæ of the studios or had selected the appropriate label from the manuals of history and æsthetics. Lengthy descriptions were still fashionable and when the critic was a poet like Gautier there is a great deal to be said for this method.

"In the midst of an orchard of heavily-laden trees," said Gautier, "the leaves of which are beginning to turn, showing the ripe grapes beneath, a beautiful fair-haired girl, tall and slender, is bending a branch of the tree, from which the vine is hanging, with one hand, and with the other she is plucking a bunch of grapes. The movement of her arms, raised above her head, gives her body lines and curves that are quite admirable in their elegance. A piece of pale pink drapery covers her left hip and shows up the pale amber of her skin. . . .

"On the right another girl, no doubt her sister, is leaning against the trunk of the fig tree which supports the vine, and in her hands is holding a basket into which the bunch of grapes is to fall. She has her back towards us, showing the graceful joining of her head and shoulders, a charming neck on which is a thick knot of red hair, of the shade so dear to painters. . . . The attachment of her shoulders, the flexibility of the spinal column, the protuberance of her hip, the crossing of her legs . . .

all combine to form one of those poses as rhythmical as a beautiful verse, in which there is a harmonious balance and poise of form as sweet to the eye as a musical cadence is to the ear. . . .

"The general tonality of the picture is maintained in that fresco colour-scheme affected by the artist, which is so admirably suited to decorative painting. It is clear, bright, without the strong shadows which make holes in the walls; but the localities are richer and more vigorous than in his previous pictures. . . . The craftsmanship is finer and closer. . . . A more poetical expression of the warm, healthy, fruitful autumn of some ideal Tempé were impossible."

The picture, which was awarded a medal, is now at Lyons. A smaller replica—with a few variations—was exhibited in the Salon of 1885.



X. L'AUTOMNE. (Autumn.)

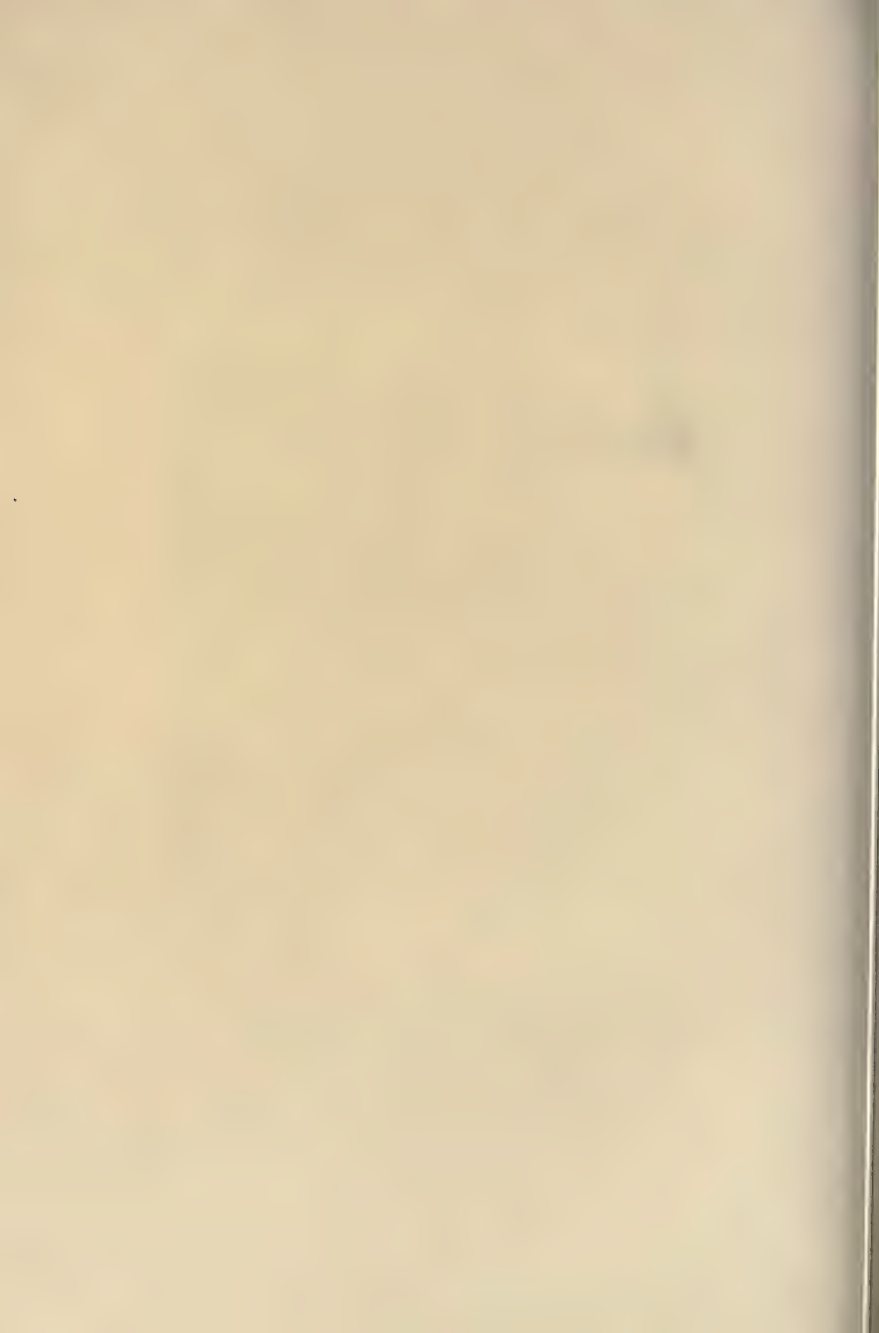


PLATE XI. A LA FONTAINE (AT THE WELL)

AMONG the easel pictures exhibited by the artist about this time, without any remarkable success, is one which is closely allied to the pictures at Amiens, and may here be profitably considered as displaying one of the elements of Puvis's style.

It was an intimate and familiar subject that he showed in the Salon of 1868 under the title of "A la Fontaine." But here again, in a beautiful wooded valley, near the well whither pitchers are taken to be filled, "the scene is in the Golden Age." The figures in this bucolic picture (they had already appeared in "Le Repos") belong to no fixed time or place. Or rather they belong to that race which was begotten of Greek statuary revised and corrected by the Italian painters. The young woman is wearing the petasus, and the Venus of Milo is nobly bending down opposite her.

So much has been said—and so justifiably—against academic art that it almost requires courage not to repudiate the considerable part played by academic tradition in Puvis's work. But doctrines are narrow and art is always transcending them. Burger was right in claiming the right of modern realism to style and maintaining that it was as good as that of traditional allegory clothed in Græco-Italian form. He was wrong in wishing to condemn every artist to sterility if he refused to throw over this "useless art" and respectfully donned the "academic old clothes."

There is no disguising the classical reminiscences in Puvis's work, especially at this time, when he was gradually feeling his way to his own vocabulary of form

and symbol. As a matter of fact it does not amount to very much. Whether, as he then did, he turned to the academic lexicon, or, as he did later on, sometimes used the modern language, he was, above all, interested in the cadence, harmony, and balance of his phrasing, and it was in them that he expressed his own personal sensibility. "I have always tried," he said to M. Thié-
bault Sisson, "to be more and more sober, more and more simple. . . . I have condensed, laboured, compressed. . . . I have always tried to make every action express something, and colour merge into and harmonize with the whiteness of its frame instead of being in contrast with it, as it has always been hitherto. . . . And in all my work, let it be clearly understood, there has been no deliberate seeking after symbolism. I have tried always to say as much as possible in the fewest possible words."



XI. A LA FONTAINE. (At the Well.)

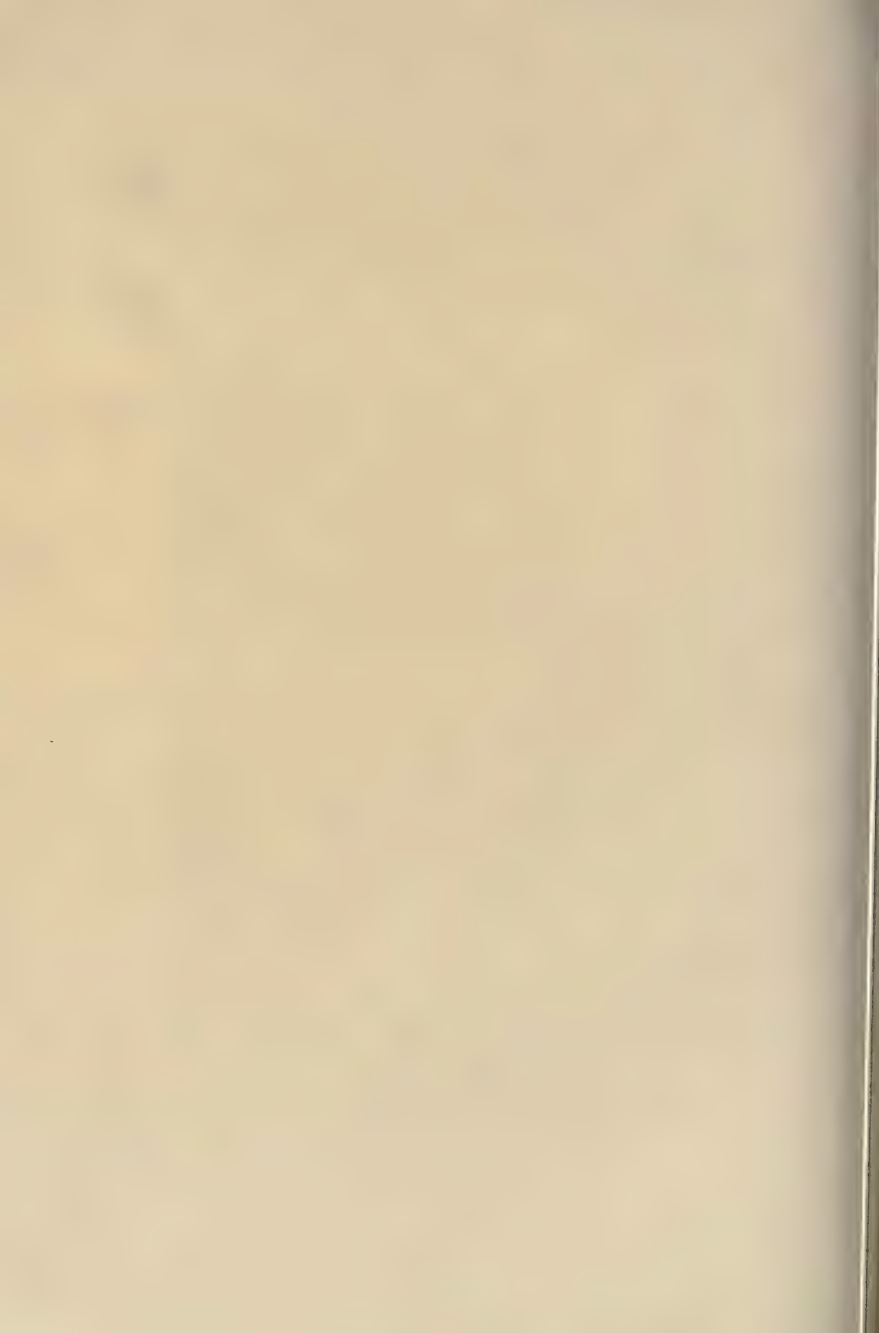


PLATE XII. AVE PICARDIA NUTRIX (THE RIVER)

AFTER the success of the four great pictures given by the State and the artist to the Picardy Museum, the town council of Amiens decided to commission Puvis to paint a new picture. This was the "Ave Picardia Nutrix," which was in the Salon of 1865.

This great picture now hangs above the landing of the noble staircase between the "Travail" and "Le Repos." A great central door separated the two halves, which in turn were cut into by two side doors. On the left is represented an apple-gathering: on the right the mending of nets and the construction of a bridge over one of the innumerable arms of the Somme.

"There is nothing peculiarly Picardian about it," said Paul Mantz, "but M. Puvis de Chavannes delights in epic generalizations, and with good reason, and he prefers aggrandizement to particularization."

We take that to mean that Puvis did not try to reproduce any particular place or scene in the neighbourhood of Amiens. He was faithful to his usual procedure, and only borrowed from the living reality a few apt colours which he pondered long and used to give form and body to a general impression. In accordance with his formula, he tried to "do much with little." A few trunks of trees, water, a wide sky over a flat country were enough to localize the scene and did not necessitate long study in the open air. But it is to be noted that a keen feeling for Nature is at the bottom of his art. "Nature moves me profoundly, I assure you," he wrote in 1891, "and for that reason it is impossible for me to take it in strong doses. A quarter of an hour's stroll

along a path that gives me pleasure is enough to keep my brain supplied for a long time. You must blame nothing but its weakness for that."

With these essential elements Puvis created a landscape with all the "vagueness and tenderness of tone of a Corot," as Gautier remarked. Like that admirable landscape painter, he knew nothing more beautiful to paint than the freshness of a bend of a river, or the noble melancholy of an undulating country. There is no need to go far to find that. "For my part," he wrote to a traveller, "I am fixed in one place and that limited, and for new vitality I turn always homewards. . . . A few flowering shrubs, a scented wood, are my delight. It is chamber music compared with the mighty harmonies that have entranced you: but my music has its own grandeur, its own calm, penetrating grace."



XII. AVE PICARDIA NUTRIX : LA RIVIÈRE. (The River.)

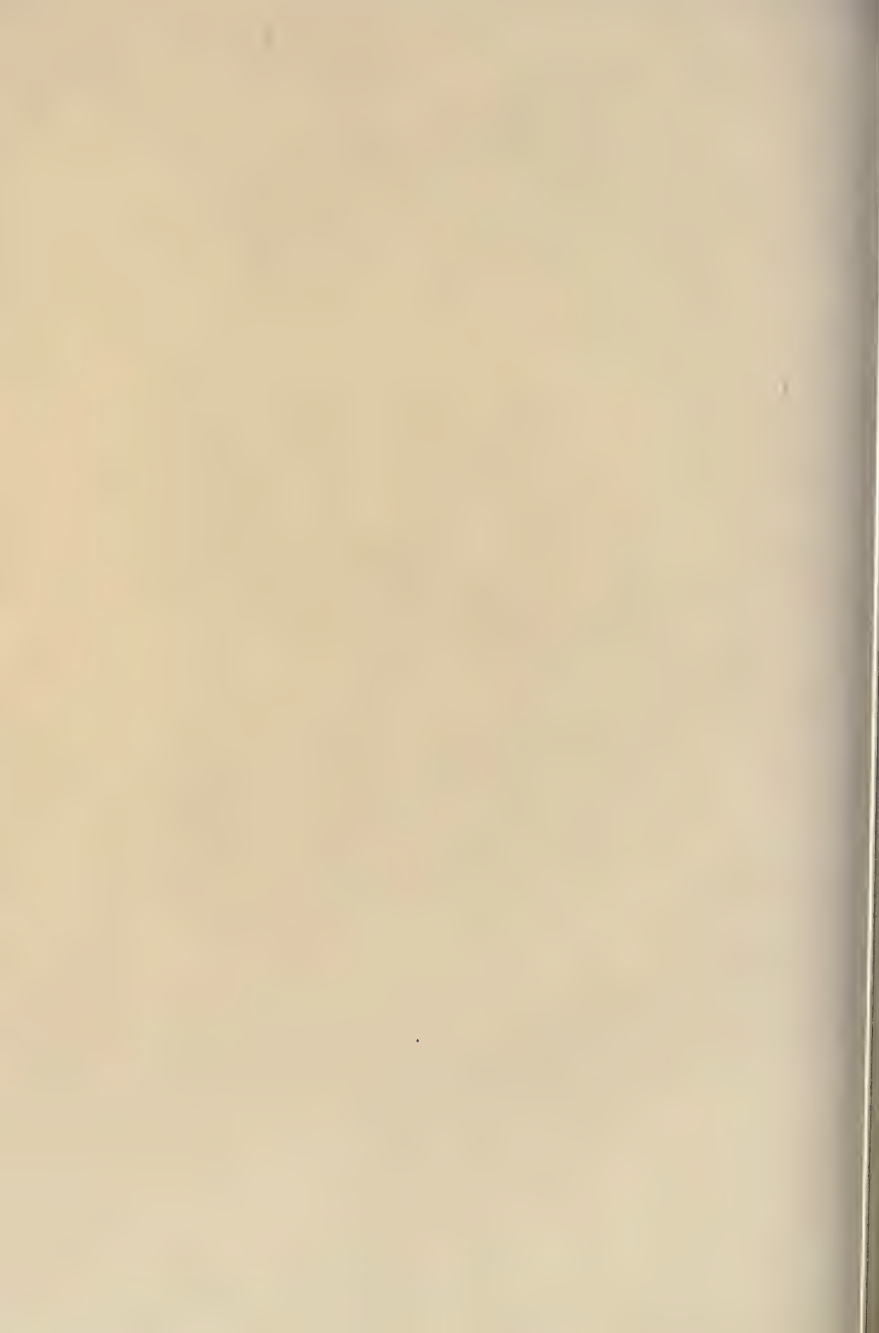


PLATE XIII. AVE PICARDIA NUTRIX (THE APPLE GATHERING)

THERE were still many whose ears remained insensible to this "chamber music," and no doubt Louis Auvray represented the opinion of the majority when he said that he was frozen by the cold monotonous colouring of the "Ave Picardia." But the number of Puvis's adherents was increasing. Duvat, for instance, maintains that Puvis's colouring was at this time more decorative and more subtle than ever it was. When the artist's pictures were hung on the walls for which they were intended it was difficult not to admit that these alleged defects of colouring were in reality a wonderful revolution in decorative art. "Those of us," said Gautier, "who have seen these beautiful pictures in the Amiens Museum on the walls for which the artist painted them, have been struck by the harmony and unity, the powerful sweetness of tone and the rich tranquillity of these frescoes on canvas, which were only made to look pale by the more or less boisterous pictures among which they were exhibited, while here they harmonize perfectly with the dull tones of the stone.

"... We must not ask of decorative painting illusion, nor deception, nor any kind of real truth. Decorative painting should hang on the walls like a veil of colour, and not penetrate them."

It would be a mistake to believe that the artist was doing violence to his nature in sacrificing strong contrasts and oppositions of colours and clinging to his scheme of delicate greys, the subtle harmonies of which he harmonized so deftly.

"I have a weakness which I hardly dare confess," he wrote to a friend in 1861. "(It) consists in my predilection for a rather gloomy aspect, low skies, solitary plains, every blade of grass of which whispers its own little song under the soft breath of the south wind. . . .
"I am waiting impatiently for bad weather, and am already negotiating with an umbrella merchant. I assure you that bad weather is much more vivid than fine weather. The great blue canopy of the sky absorbs too much; the finer the weather, the blacker the world . . . ; while a great veil of a subtle grey, subtle and fine as the wings of the birds you speak of, a grey which gives the smallest plant its colour, and its full value to every object—such a grey is the sweet sustained accompaniment that suffers everything to sing: it is the marvel of marvels: at any rate, it is perfectly clear that I love it more than anything else."



XIII. AVE PICARDIA NUTRIX: THE APPLE-GATHERING.

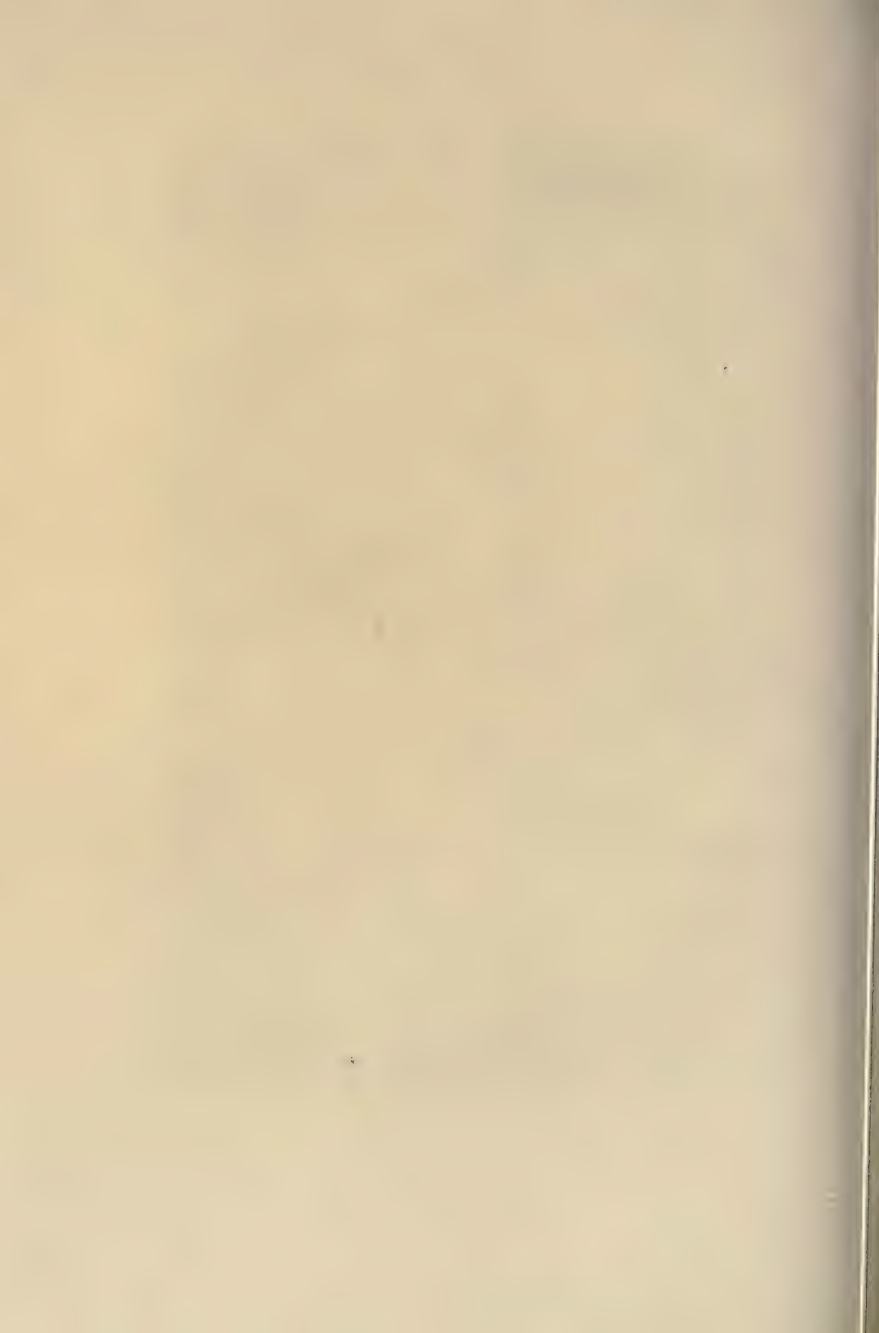


PLATE XIV. AVE PICARDIA NUTRIX (DRAWING
FOR THE SPINNER)

THE moment had not yet come when the critics could surrender to the charm of his art without cavilling at the means employed. At that time it was thought that Puvis attained his object "in spite of" his colour and drawing, and the most well-meaning of the critics went on advising him to take more care with his execution.

"M. Puvis de Chavannes, to whom we have hitherto been able to give only tempered praise," said Paul Mantz, "is this year much more happily inspired . . .; his groups are nobly balanced; although the figures are few the canvas is well filled, and the eye travels with pleasure over the movements which are so just in their severity, and the attitudes which are so happily contrived. It seems to us that the painter, who hitherto had contented himself with a rough indication of his figures by a sort of shorthand modelling, has taken a great deal of trouble with his drawing. It is a real advance, and we may hope that M. Puvis will one day supply the defects of his early education with hard consistent work. He has now the instinct for design, but he lacks the science of it."

"The execution is very inadequate," said Félix Jahyer, "a thick black line surrounds each figure in such a way that there is no roundness in the bodies and they seem all the more flat inasmuch as the modelling is completely at fault. But in spite of these material defects . . . the weakness of the execution does not now prevent one feeling the nobility of the idea, the distinction of the artist's mind, and the firmness of his intentions. Every

one recognizes in him the exact allegorical feeling and his power of giving it a vague expression of grandeur. The artist must now definitely take rank among the most distinguished representatives of great art."

That the artist was not lacking in the "science of design" could have been proved over and over again to these counsellors by the admirable sketch for "La Fileuse" here reproduced. And yet there was some truth in these reservations, since Puvis's design was to undergo much fundamental modification. But it was precisely in the direction of abbreviation and simplification, from which the critics tried to turn him, that the artist was to find the formula which he had sought so untiringly for so many years.



XIV. AVE PICARDIA NUTRIX:
DRAWING FOR THE SPINNER.

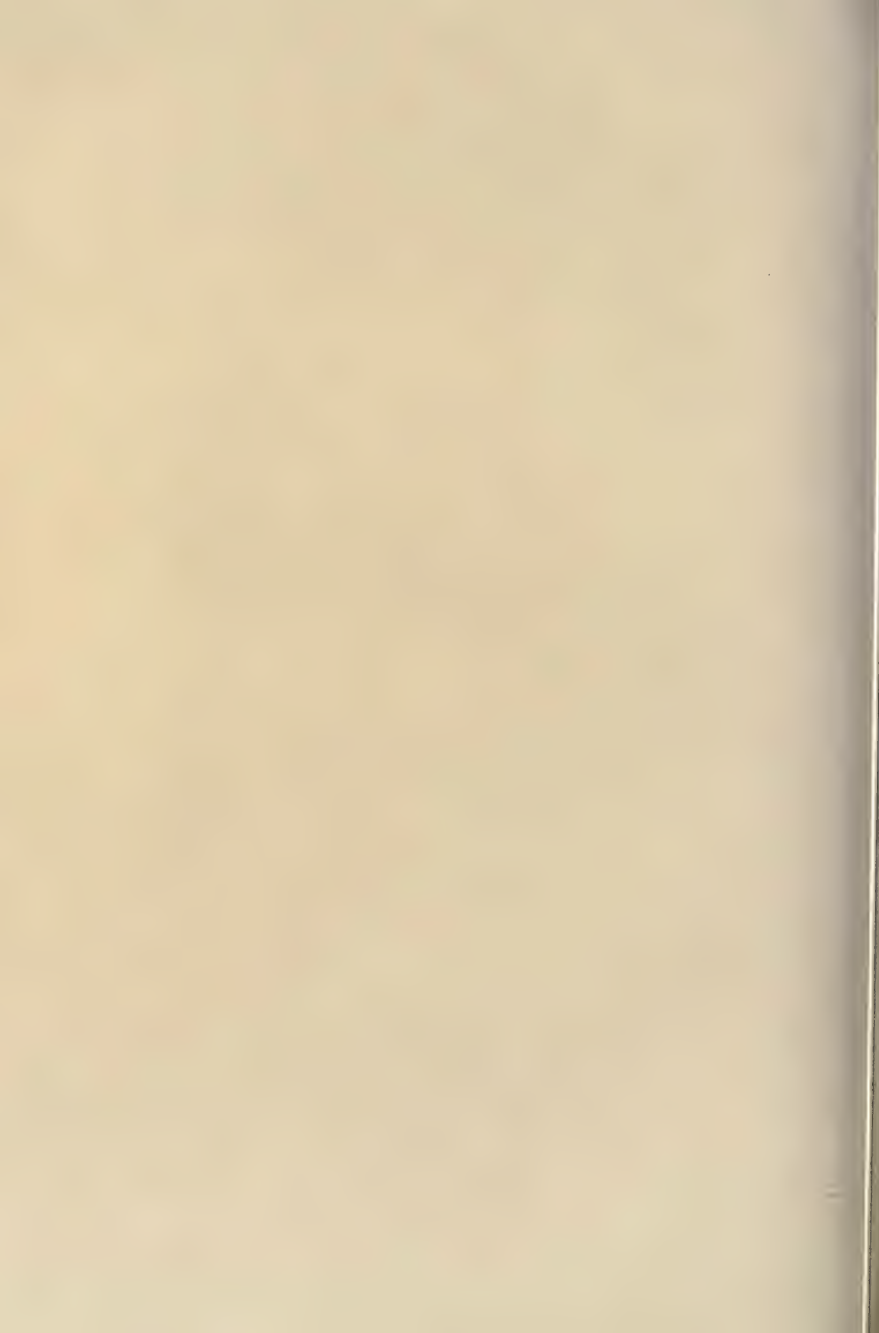


PLATE XV. LE SOMMEIL (SLEEP)

PUVIS'S quest at last led him to turn his back on anatomical exercises. He had already subordinated modelling to outline, sometimes justifying those who reproached him with meagreness and dryness. It only remained to envelop his figures in an atmosphere which would reduce relief to the essential masses and so preserve their volume without depriving them of their simplicity. In this respect "Le Sommeil," now in the Lille Museum, which was exhibited in the Salon of 1867 may be considered to mark a turning-point in the artist's career.

Paul de Saint-Victor confessed himself almost wholly captured by this "great and noble sketch . . . the painting of which is more musical than plastic, speaking less to the eyes than to the mind . . . ; the indecision of the drawing, the vagueness of the colour are here in harmony with the subject. It is a lovely dream traced with a silver pencil upon the grey canvas of the night. It were impossible to praise too highly the majestic simplicity of the landscape. There is a quality about it that is almost virginal and august."

But Paul Mantz still found fault: "There is nothing in the colouring," he said, "to shock the eye. A large crepuscular tonality envelops the group of sleepers in the foreground and extends over the silent fields far into the distance; in the background an ambiguous star is sinking to the horizon or ascending the sky, for it is impossible to know whether M. Puvis de Chavannes meant to represent sunset or moonrise. It is one of the defects of his picture; but the artist who has for so long ignored colour and renounced it has never known its

sister, light. Why, if he will not study Nature, does he not turn to a landscape by Corot or Daubigny? . . . As for the labourers and shepherds who are lying asleep in the foreground, resting after their toil, they are sleeping rather emphatically, as is to be expected from an artist who has rummaged among the Italian masters in the Bibliothèque, and has been unable to forget them. The drawing of the picture consists entirely of outline.

"M. Puvis makes fine plans for his pictures; but, like the German painters, he disdains craftsmanship and, as a fatal consequence he never expresses more than half his idea."



XV. LE SOMMEIL. (Sleep.)

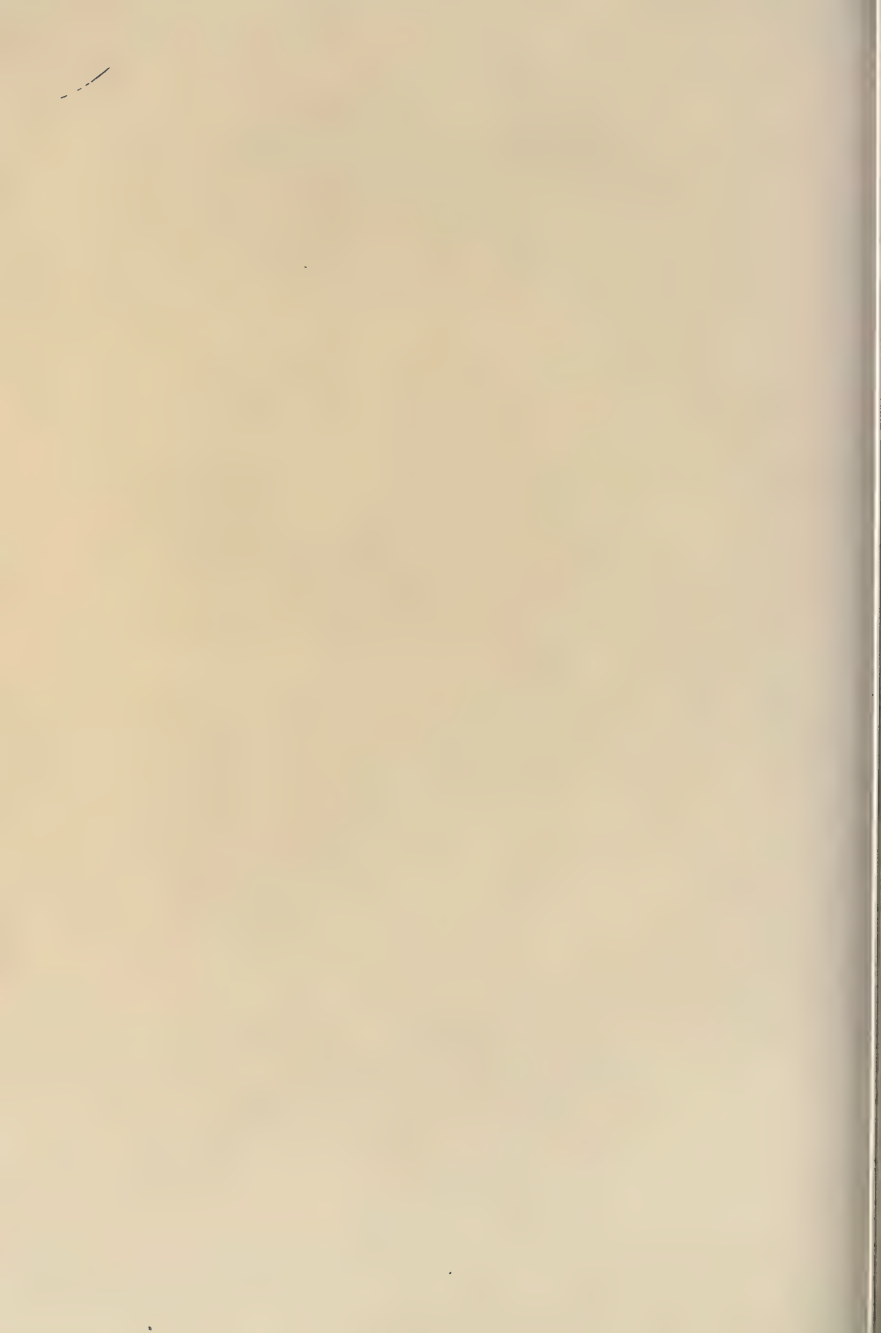


PLATE XVI. MARSEILLE, PORTE DE L'ORIENT
(MARSEILLES, GATE OF THE EAST)

PUVIS'S fame had sufficiently increased since the "Retour de Chasse" for the citizens of Marseilles to realize the importance of the gift that had been made them. Therefore in 1867 they commissioned him to paint two large pictures for the Fine Arts Museum in the Palais de Longchamps, the price to be ten thousand francs.

These pictures were shown in the Salon of 1869. Their exceptional size procured them a place on the staircase of honour leading to the galleries.

In "Massalia, Colonie Grecque" there are a few little groups of fishermen and merchants standing on the banks of a river, and here and there white buildings are in course of construction.

The decorative arrangement of Marseille, Porte de L'Orient was more difficult to contrive. Puvis wished to represent the large welcome given by a maritime city to vessels from distant lands and at first thought of painting the sea with many ships, seen from the quays of the town itself. However he found it necessary to reverse this order. The foreground is filled with a ship whose passengers belong to various Levantine races. It is just coming into view of the town standing on the horizon above the blue sea with its jetties and buildings gleaming in the light.

Year by year the artist's craftsmanship was growing more simple and more humble and making more and more audacious sacrifices, and on this occasion the critics adopted a tone of peculiar irritation.

Castagnary was particularly violent: "Fantastic colour-

ing . . . painted with such a faltering, fumbling hand that there is in the modelling not even the relief of a mantelpiece. . . . So much the worse for Marseilles which is condemned to become the washpot of bad painting! . . . By placing these pitiful decorations at the entrance to the gallery, so that the public cannot help seeing them in all their unprofitableness, the directors are running a great risk of damping enthusiasm and sending visitors away.

"M. Puvis de Chavannes neither draws nor paints, he composes: that is his speciality. But does he compose after Nature's fashion with living creatures . . . ? Not a bit of it. To express what he calls an idea he has to use imaginary bodies moving in an imaginary setting. . . . The whole thing is cowardly, feeble, uncertain, dirty in colour and melancholy in aspect. . . ."



XVI. MARSEILLE, PORTE DE L'ORIENT. (Marseille, Gate of the East.)

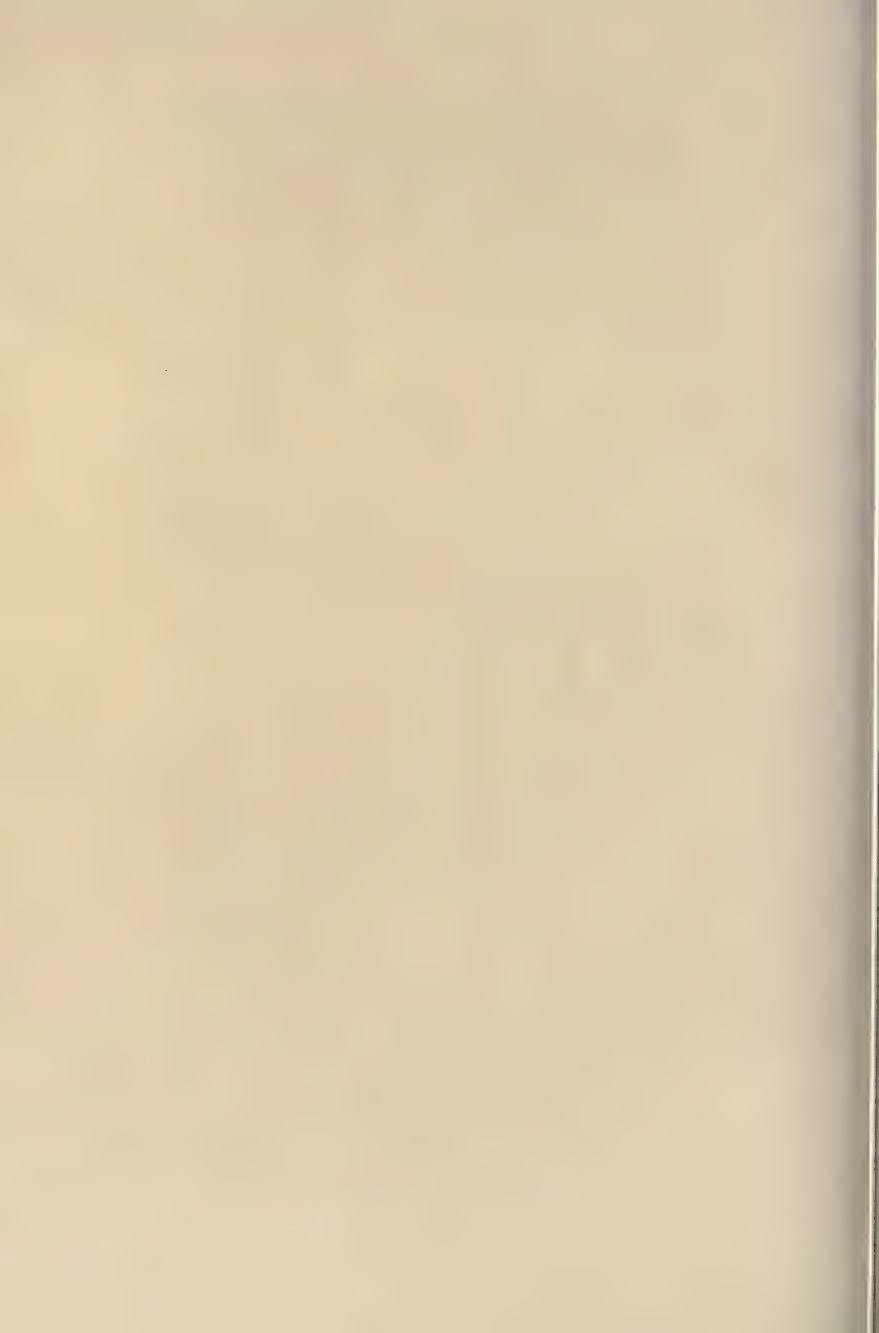


PLATE XVII. SAINT JEAN-BAPTISTE (SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST)

" **L** A *Décollation de Saint Jean-Baptiste*," which was exhibited in the Universal Exhibition of 1889, was considered an outrage in the Salon of 1870.

J. Goujon wrote: "Among painters there is said to be a stir about this eccentric piece of work. The public only laughs." "Never," said Marius Chaumelin, "did Epinal's imagery produce anything more grotesque in its figure drawing or more false in its colour."

"What a grotesque vignette!" cried Castagnary. "The three figures are all set in the same plane in attitudes almost childishly naïve. The Saint does not look like a cripple, as has been said. Rather he looks as though he were sinking into the ground; quite obviously he is being swallowed up before our eyes. He is buried up to his knees. One may bet that by the time the sword reaches him the Saint will have disappeared; the blade will cleave the empty air."

"We had best consider this picture as a passing incident," said Elie Saurin, an admirer of Puvis's previous work. Among those who saw something else in the "Saint Jean-Baptiste" than an "amusing caricature" were René Ménard and Georges Lafenestre whose defence of it was this:

"Puvis de Chavannes," he said, "has treated his subject with profundity and lofty naïveté. . . . This picture, being very profound in its art and very real in its nobility, has naturally aroused hilarity. But there is nothing in it truly to excite amusement or surprise. M. Puvis de Chavannes is one of the few painters who have the

courage to consider art as something more than a futile and paltry trick of illusion; he believes, as the men of past ages believed, that painting is a means of expression, that the hand executes but the mind directs. The battle he is fighting is not futile. His work will live longer than that of the scoffers because it rests on more general and more durable principles of art. In its general aspect, by the potent tranquil charm of colouring, in its poetic aspect, by the rightness of the attitudes and facial expressions, in its technique, by its force of style and largeness of design, the ' *Décollation de Saint Jean* ' is one of the most important pictures in the Salon."



XVII. SAINT JEAN-BAPTISTE. (Saint John the Baptist.)

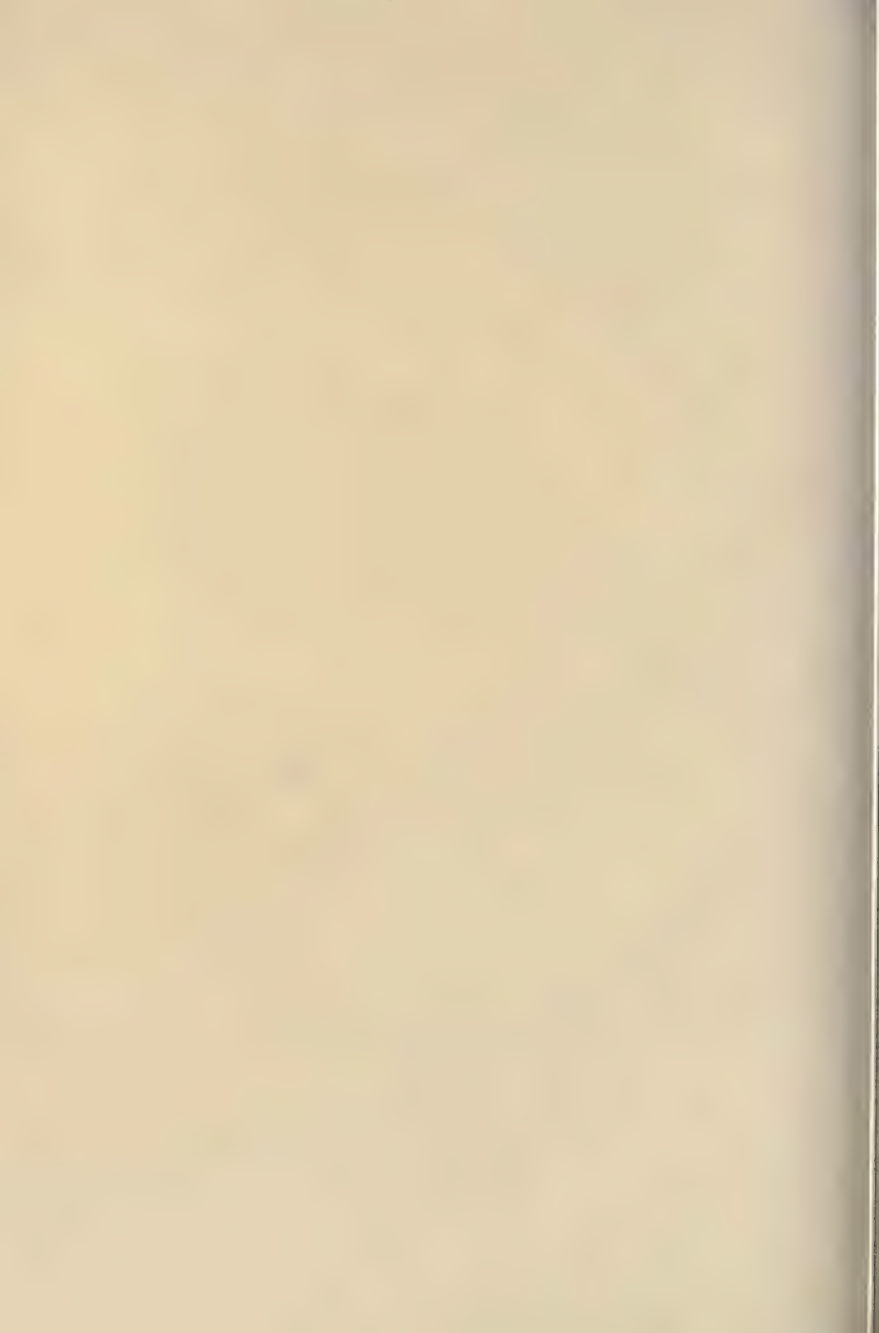


PLATE XVIII. LES JEUNES FILLES ET LA MORT
(GIRLS AND DEATH)

IN the "Saint Jean-Baptiste" the artist was granted a certain modicum of indulgence on account of two finely drawn torsos. But in the Salon of 1870 he had also another picture, "La Madeleine au Désert," from which he had rigorously excluded any display of craftsmanship. The Saint is standing with a skull in her hand looking for all the world like an ostrich egg, and her long thin silhouette is set against a dull rock. The foreground is scantily filled with a few stones inhabited by one wretched little lizard. An arid plain stretches away to the horizon. And that is all. It is probable that even his most kindly well-wishers were rather put out of countenance by this picture of an almost beggarly humility.

The same year the artist was inspired by the agony and hope of the Siege to paint two more of these long wan figures: "Le Ballon" and "Le Pigeon Voyageur," which in 1874 were sold by lot in Chicago—queer pictures in which Puvis tackled modern subjects without any change in his usual methods.

In the Salon of 1872 Puvis de Chavannes was a member of the famous jury which, among other pictures, rejected the "Femme Couchée" of the unhappy Courbet, but he took no part in that wretched vindictive campaign. At the very outset he sent in his resignation to escape being a party to a system of intolerance from which he had himself suffered so long.

His independence needed courage and in a very short time Puvis met with the consequences. After twelve years of success he had one of his pictures, "Les Jeunes Filles et la

Mort" rejected by the very jury from which he had resigned. It is a strange piece of work in its rather literary conception, one of those pictures which give us to think when the artist defends himself against the charge of being a thinker and a mystic.

"How little do these dreadful connoisseurs know me," he wrote in 1888, "who, forgetting the profound and faithful love I have shown for everything in Nature, try to confine me to a few deliberate incursions in the region of philosophy which I abhor!"



XVIII. LES JEUNES FILLES ET LA MORT.
(Girls and Death).

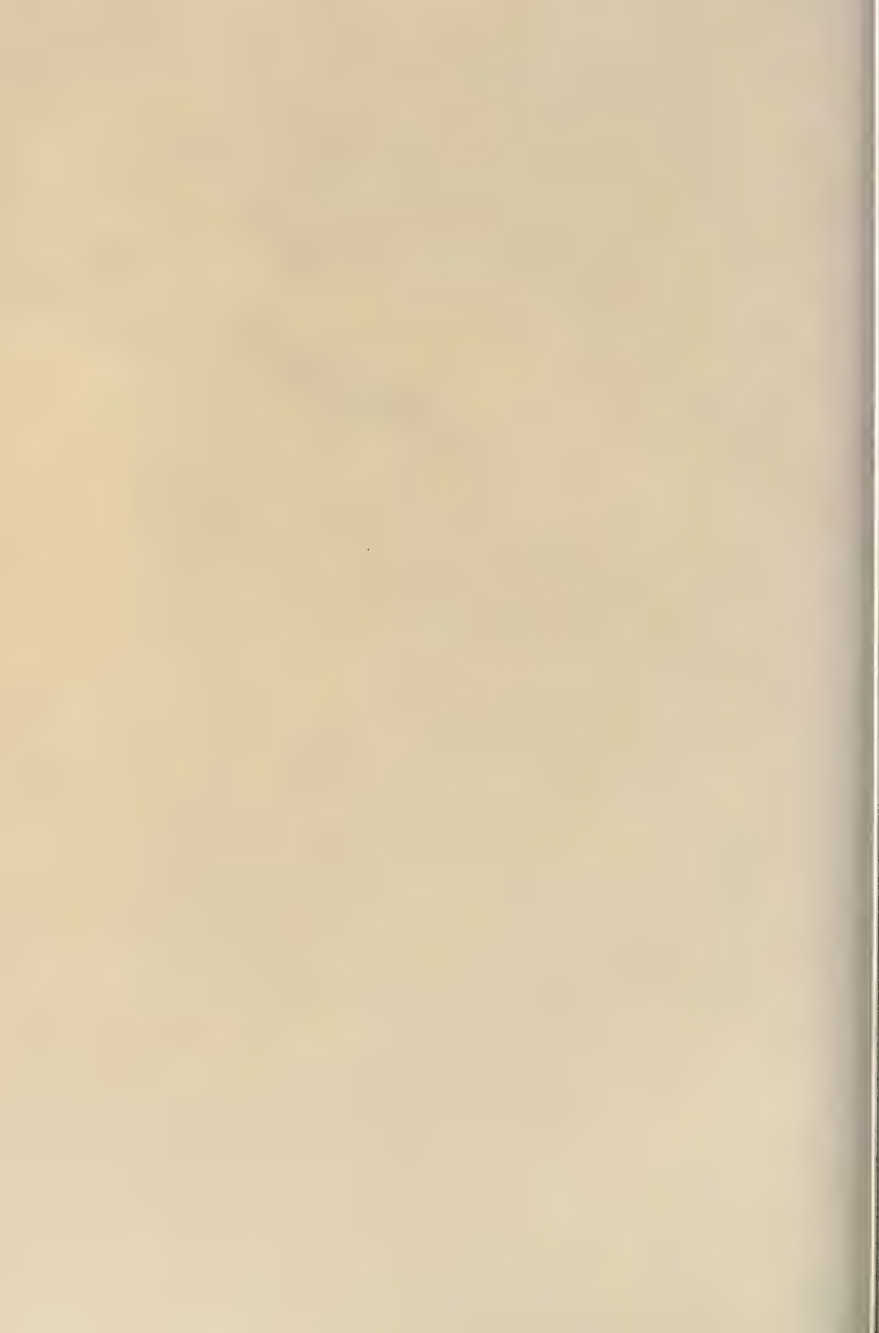


PLATE XIX. L'ESPERANCE (HOPE)

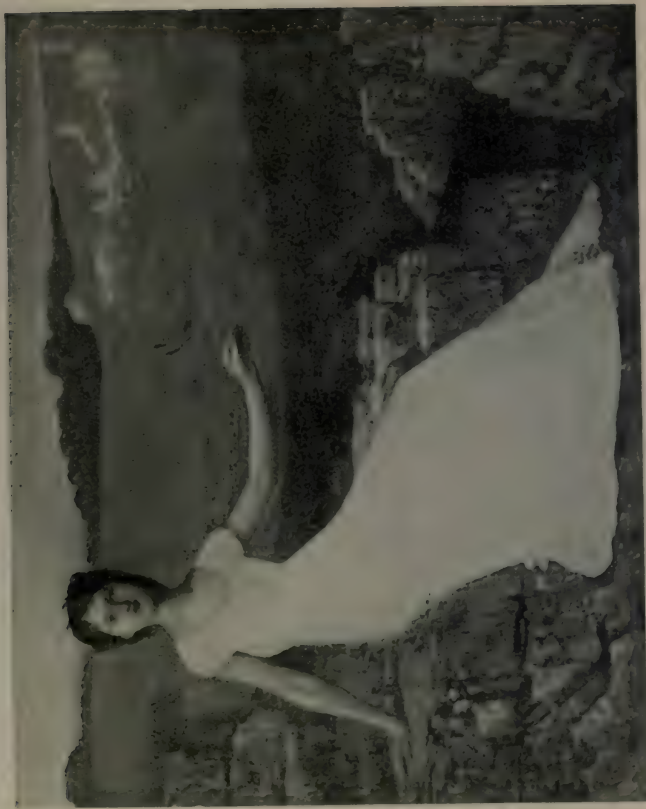
IT is delightful to us that Puvis de Chavannes should have made it a sort of point of honour to be a man of will, balance and health, a man "who loves life and hates dreamers." When the light of day was gone, after he had worked furiously all day in the large studio at Neuilly, whither he walked early in the morning with soldierly regularity, when mercilessly he had exacted from himself and his assistants the maximum of work, it was splendid to see him taking his ease in careless talk and frank good humour at table, where his formidable appetite was the admiration of his guests and the terror of the mistress of the house. But if he was never one of those æsthètes who never take off their halo and talk the more the less they work, if he loved life with all the ardour of a man whose senses sometimes make imperious demands on him, nevertheless when he was at work, the *bon vivant* disappeared and became subservient to the poet.

In his private life Puvis often showed that his heart was in the right place, but he reserved the best part of his sensibility for his work. "The public is wrong," he wrote, "in imagining the artist to be a creature of passion, desperately staking his whole life on that one throw. If he keeps his balance he is simply a creature of divination; if he understands and controls his passion he preserves his health and a cool brain. Hugo, Lamartine, Delacroix, would have died in their prime, if in their youth they had poured forth all the tears they caused to be shed."

When the flower of delicate feeling which Puvis had jealously guarded within himself, finally opened in his

work, it was cruel torture for the artist, torture to which he could never grow accustomed, to see it handled clumsily and roughly.

No amount of reservations and concessions could heal the wound caused by appreciations like that of Castagnary of the delicious "Espérance" which was conceived after his rejection in 1870, and exhibited in the Salon of 1872. It is certainly deliberate in its naïveté, but it is exquisitely fresh and graceful. "What stirring of the heart can be inspired by this wan little girl holding a piece of grass in her hand and sitting opposite a childishly painted grave? What comfort can be derived from seeing this melancholy skinny little person? . . . And the sky and the stones? The whole dead, sterile landscape? But I must stop, for I know that I am in the presence, perhaps not of a superior talent, but of rare sincerity, and no man should wilfully gibe at "disinterested good faith."



XIX. L'ESPÉRANCE. (Hope.)

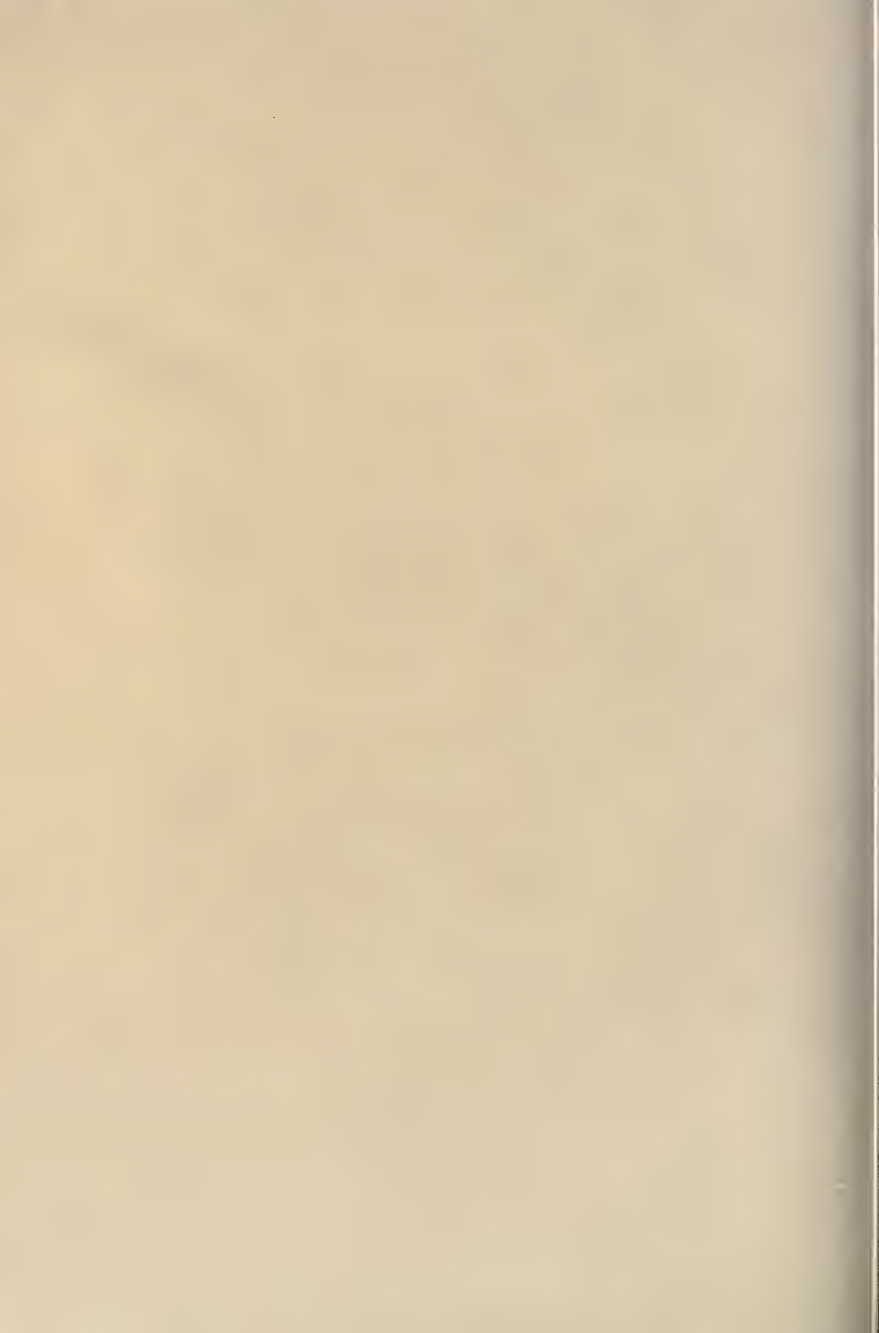


PLATE XX. CHARLES MARTEL

AFTER he had finished "La Moisson" (also known as "L'Eté,") which was exhibited in 1873, bought by the State, and sent to the Chartres Museum, Puvis devoted himself to the decoration of the staircase of the Hotel de Ville, at Poitiers, which he had been commissioned to paint in 1872.

The dates of the work were written in pencil by the artist on a piece of studio furniture, piously preserved by M. Paul Baudouin.

"Tuesday, August 5 (1873). "Martel," first blocked out the big canvas; Wednesday, Sept. 10, at noon, began to paint; Friday, Nov. 21, finished it; began again, and finished a second time, Jan. 13, 1874; wrote signature Feb. 1; signed the cartoon ("Rade-gonde ") March 7; signed and finished September 27. . . ."

If the painter had kept an exact account of the days spent on the work he would have had to set down the whole of the calendar on the little cupboard, for he never missed his work. The "graffiti " are evidence of this, and that is why they are included here instead of certain enthusiastic descriptions, such as that of M. Louis Gonse, who in writing of the 1874 Salon, hailed the picture of "Charles Martel " and the cartoon of "Sainte Radegonde," listening to the poet Fortunat reading in the cloisters of Sainte Croix at Poitiers. In spite of a few scoffers who dubbed the cartoon "The Apotheosis of Théophile Gautier," the two Poitiers pictures met with a very sympathetic reception in the Salons of 1874 and 1875.

Paul Mantz may be taken to represent moderate

opinion. "M. Puvis de Chavannes is systematic," he says. "He is incomplete; he eliminates every difficulty; he is always beginning sentences and leaving them unfinished. But no one will venture to say that he fails to interest with his vast silent contrivances, which are hardly paintings at all. 'The Charles Martel sauvant la Chrétienté par sa Victoire sur les Sarrazins' is a significant type of the defects and qualities of this bizarre inventor. . . . The scene takes place in a grey mist behind which everything loses form and colour. The figures are dreamed rather than written, . . . it is very strange and disputable. I cannot be enthusiastic about it. . . ." However, the critic does admit that Puvis has succeeded in realizing a very decorative harmony. "No more violent tones in this picture; everything falls into its place; there are greys everywhere. The effect is rather arbitrary, but the painting is tranquil and undisturbing, and the silence of the colouring makes it possible more easily to hear the murmur of the idea."



XX. CHARLES MARTEL.

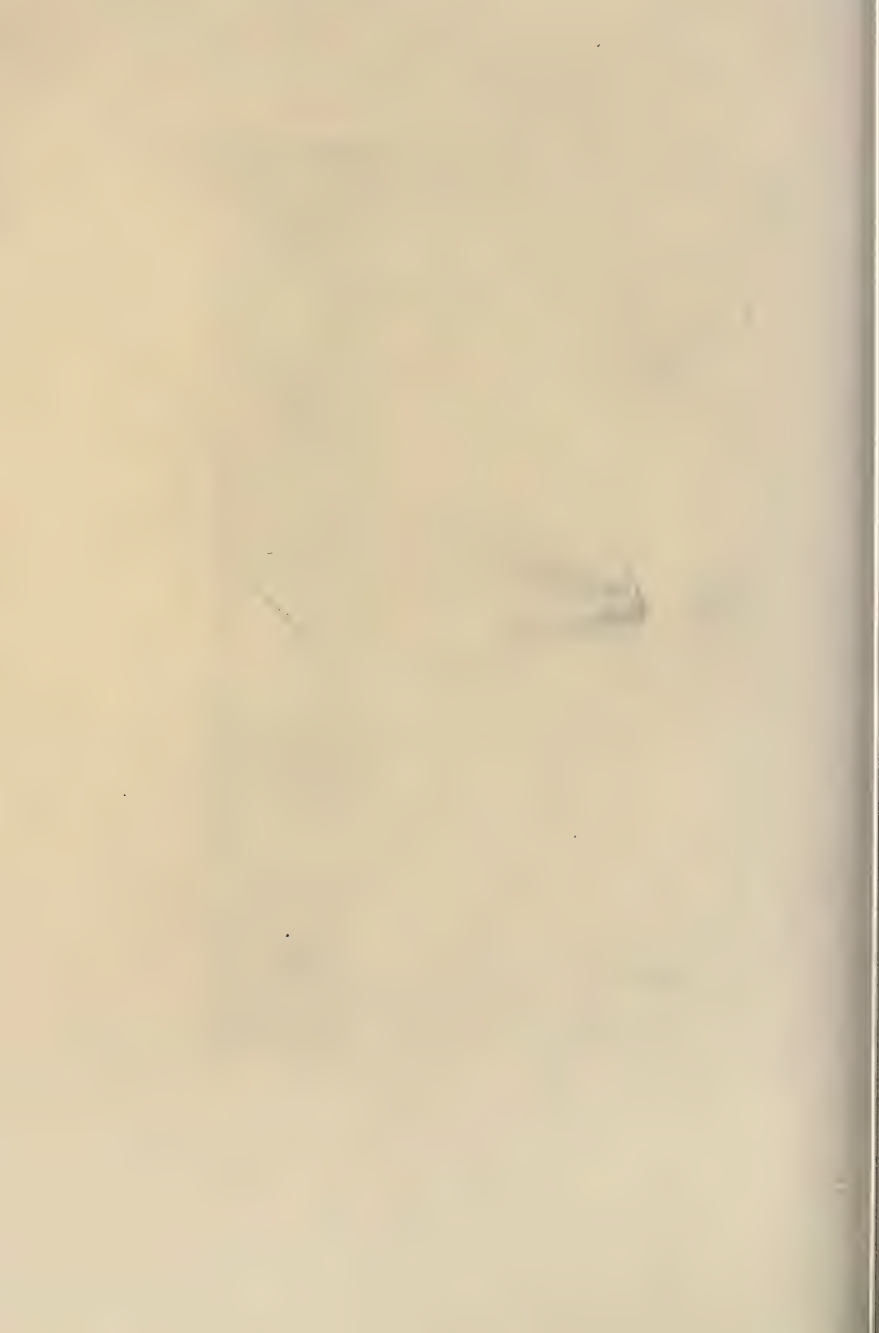


PLATE XXI. RENCONTRE DE SAINTE GENEVIEVE
ET DE SAINT GERMAIN (THE MEETING OF SAINT
GENEVIEVE AND SAINT GERMAIN)

THIS is the artist's most popular picture, and it best of all helps us to arrive at a true estimation of the value of his art.

As is well known, the Panthéon, the heaviest and most solid building in Paris, has changed its purpose as often as the country has changed its politics. It was originally designed to replace the old abbey church of Sainte Geneviève, was then consecrated by the "Constituante" to the worship of great men, became religious under the Restoration, secular in 1830, religious in 1851, and once more secular in 1885 on the occasion of Victor Hugo's funeral.

The mural decoration was in 1848 entrusted to Chenavard. Puvis's compatriot had conceived, and in part carried out, a formidable philosophical history of humanity which was interrupted by the events of 1851. His successor would have been not at all pleased by an attempt to establish a connexion between their work. And yet in some of Chenavard's cartoons (such as the "Deluge," the "She-wolf's Children," the "Catacombs," and the "Italian Poets"), there is a certain symbolism in conception and a certain simplification of form which makes the comparison inevitable.

The project of decorating the Panthéon which had been restored to great men, was taken up again in 1874 by the Director of Fine Arts, Philippe de Chennevières. "I would like to employ the remaining group of the superb army (of artists) in the decoration of a monument really worthy of the name, a really national

monument," he wrote in his report. "The decoration of the Panthéon should be a vast poem of painting and sculpture to the glory of Sainte Geneviève, who will remain the most ideal figure of the earliest days of our race, a poem in which the legend of the patron saint of Paris should be combined with the noble history of the origin of Christianity in France."

Baudry, Joseph Blanc, Bonnat, Cabanel, J. P. Laurens, Henri Lévy, Meissonier, were marked out for the work. Puvis de Chavannes, whom Chennevières, to his lasting credit, was one of the first to appreciate, joyfully accepted the "offer of the magnificent work" in May, 1874.

It took him four years to carry out; years of great doubt and anxiety. The political situation was very restive, and the Director's position was distinctly weak. The project was attacked by the radicals, who thought it too clerical, and by the clericals, who thought it not religious enough. . . . "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," said Puvis, as he went on with his work. "Give me a pair of blinkers and let me proceed!"



XXI. RENCONTRE DE SAINTE GENEVIEVE ET DE SAINT GERMAIN.
(The Meeting of Saint Geneviève and Saint Germain.)

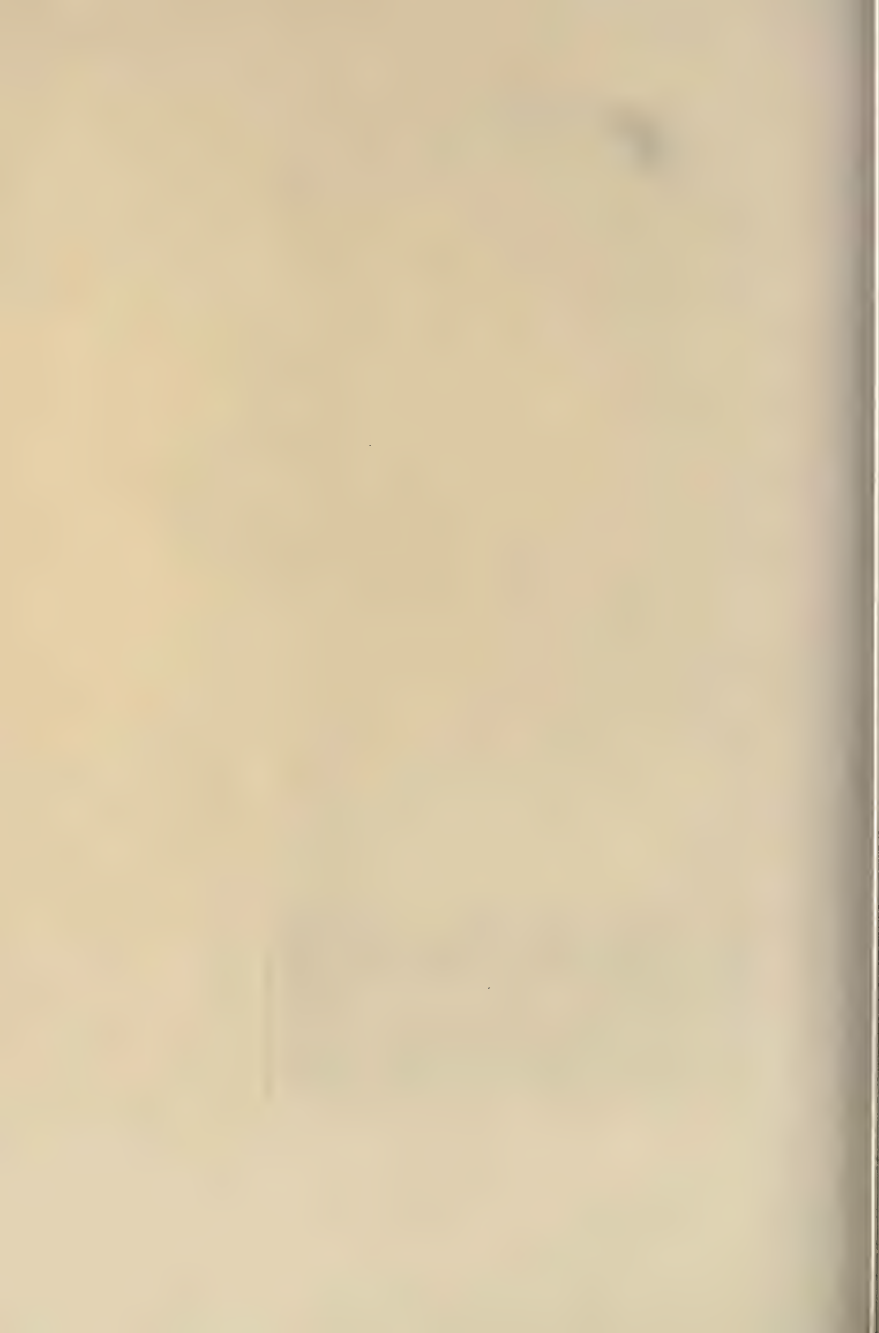


PLATE XXII. SAINTE GENEVIEVE ET SAINT GERMAIN (CENTRAL PANEL)

THE portion assigned to Puvis (much enlarged later on at the end of his life) at first consisted of a long frieze along which marched several tall figures—Saint Paterne de Vannes (painted from Elie Delaunay), Saint Victor de Beauvais (Pollet, the engraver), Saint Trophine d'Artes (Philippe de Chennevières), and Saint Paul de Narbonne (Puvis himself).

Below the frieze were four panels separated by pilasters, representing scenes of the childhood of Sainte Geneviève. The most important of these pictures occupies three of these panels, and represents the meeting mentioned in the following inscription: "In the year 429 Saint Germain d'Auxerre et Saint Loup, on their way to England to combat the heresies of the Pelagians, came into the neighbourhood of Nanterre. In the crowd that came running up Saint Germain saw a girl in whom he saw the divine impress. He questioned her, and foretold the high destiny for which she was marked out. This girl was Sainte Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris."

The sketch reproduced in the foregoing plate represents the whole scene, which was shown in three cartoons in the Salon of 1876. The fourth self-contained panel was shown with them.

The voice of the malcontents, among whom was Charles Blanc, who complained of their religious character, was hardly heard. The newspapers and pamphlets of the time proclaim a real triumph for the artist.

"After many struggles," wrote Charles Yriarte, "many experiences, and, I may say, much suffering, for from

the very beginning we have all seen the gaping incredulity of the public, the timid doubts of the more cultured, and the coarse laughter of the ignorant . . . the artist has now won the interest and esteem of the public. . . . M. de Chavannes had a limited audience: he was isolated in his intellectual aristocracy, and we must all remember the strange inauguration of the frescoes in the Amiens Museum, presided over by Théophile Gautier, while only a few of the initiate were present. Now, after a struggle of many years, he is held in honour, and his hour has assuredly come."



XXII. SAINTE GENEVIEVE ET SAINT GERMAIN.
(Central Panel.)

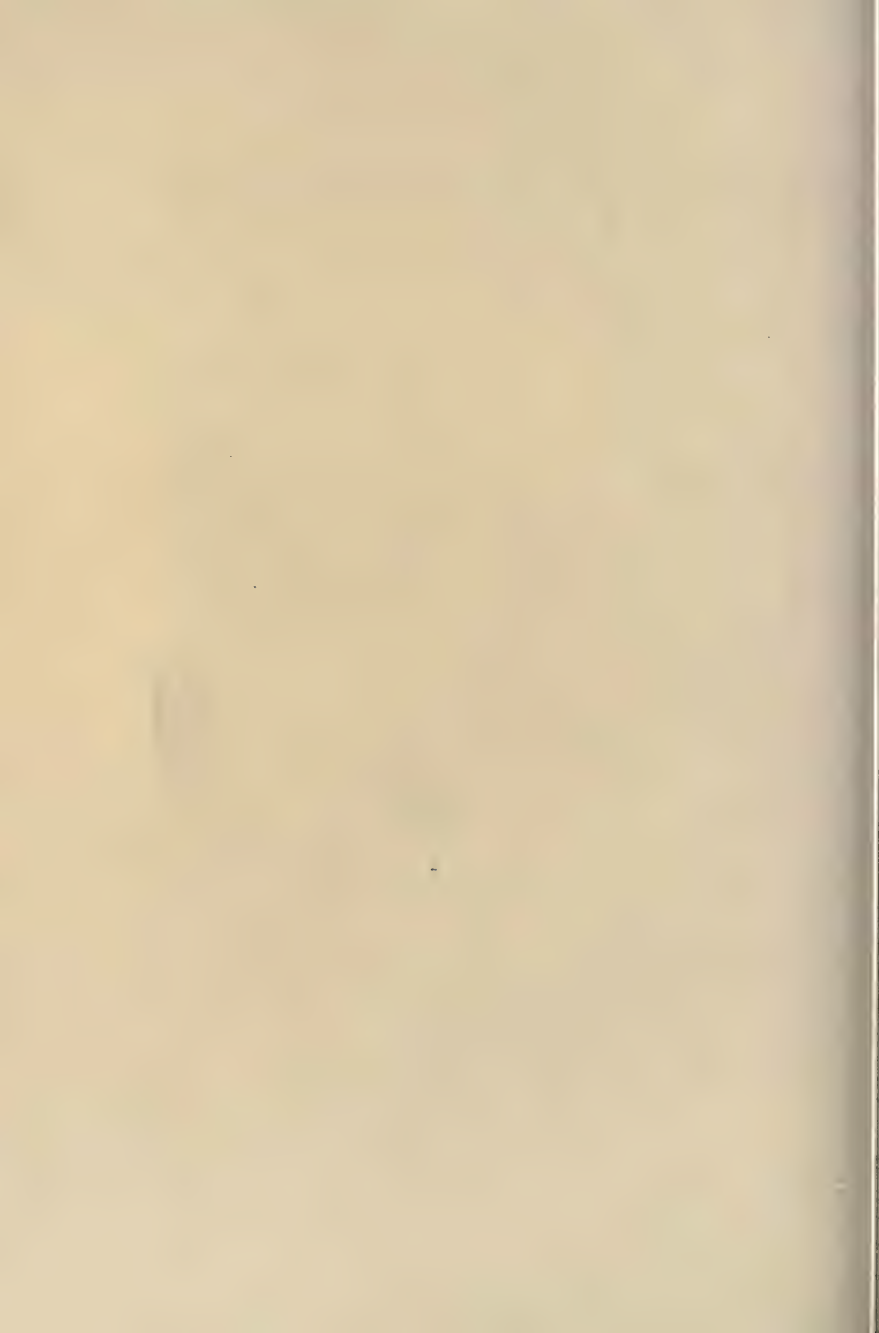


PLATE XXIII. SAINTE GENEVIEVE ET SAINT
GERMAIN (LEFT PANEL)

EVEN those who, like Georges Dufour, still spoke of the "rebel hand" of Puvis, declared that he alone had the secret of great painting. His drawing had become "firm and true," his colouring "left nothing to be desired" (Max Radiguet). What had formerly been called clumsiness and inexperience was now called "simplicity, delicious truth, exquisite naïveté" (Victor de Swarte).

Paul de Saint Victor in "La Presse," for the first time shows unreserved admiration, and even Paul Mantz is direct and almost whole-hearted. "No doubt," he said, "there are here and there a few singularities of detail, but the whole picture is serious, and will provide the church for which it is intended with a great serene piece of decoration."

M. Jules Claretie who as far back as 1874 had sided with the artist was finally enrolled among his admirers and declared that the picture deserved the medal of honour. "There is in it," he said admirably, "a feeling of order, a poetry of line, a potent charm even in the severity of the silhouettes which stand out against the delightful landscapes, and the distant prospects which are so full of air; there is so much light and sweetness even in the empty spaces of these huge pictures! They call to mind some admirable rounded symphony."

"Truth, simplicity, nobility," said Georges Lafenestre, "everything that constitutes great art is here, and a man must be singularly blind or obstinate not to admire these three master-qualities in the rare talent of M. Puvis de Chavannes, who is now at the very zenith of his powers."

We could go on making these quotations for ever, and would gladly do so if we had space, for never was success more hardly or more honestly won than this. Puvis was then over fifty and we have seen him for more than fifteen years going his way without ever turning aside, in spite of all the advice given him and the sarcasm thrown at his work. And even now he could not be sure that he had rid himself of malevolent spectators or that they were not watching out for his least mistake.



XXIII. SAINTE GENEVIEVE ET
SAINT GERMAIN (Left Panel.)

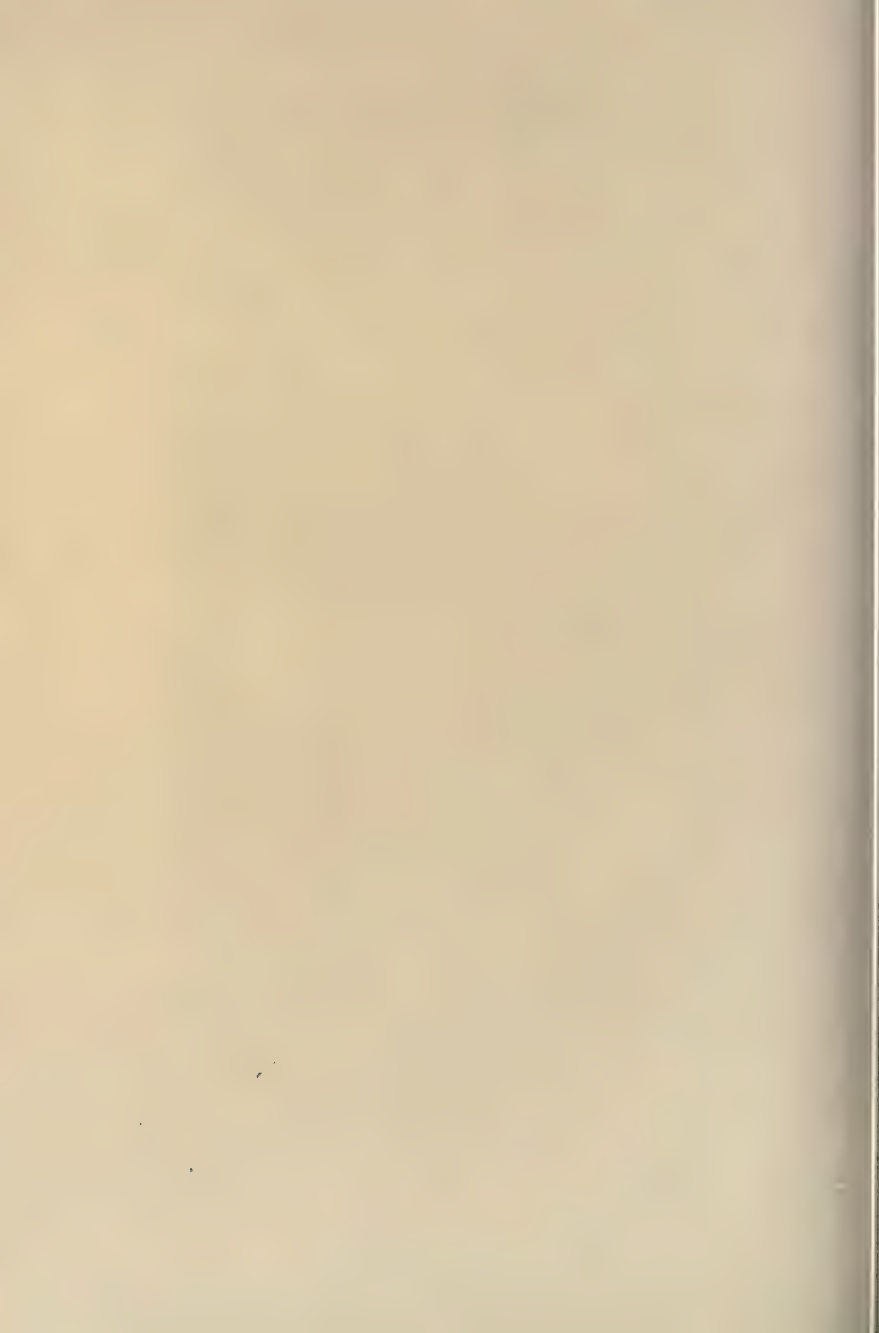


PLATE XXIV. LA GRANDE SŒUR (THE ELDER SISTER)

IT was not only a certain lofty conception of his subject and of Nature that triumphed at the Salon of 1876, but a decorative formula.

If the public had been gradually educated up to it, it must also be remarked that this formula had been steadily perfected and purified. Paul Mantz, who now thoroughly appreciated the simplified forms, the harmony of the proportionately diminished tones, was not wrong in saying that the artist had made a great advance on his earlier work and was on the point of completely realizing the aim of his efforts.

In the Panthéon, as Bonnin observed, Puvis's prepossessions and predilections were absolutely necessary. There were no brilliant gilding and precious marbles as in the Opera, recently decorated by Baudry. The artist had to give life to cold, bare stone, and it was one of Puvis's great merits that he knew how to reckon with his setting.

"His care for the harmony of his picture with the stone," says Chennevières, "his horror of eating into the wall with a black hole of paint were always in Puvis's mind throughout his work. I never saw him enter the Panthéon, while he was painting his pictures in his big studio at Neuilly, without confirming his impression of the tone of the stone by comparing it with a little sketch book he carried in his pocket. One day I heard him say, when some one was telling him that one of his colleagues had declared that he was only concerned with painting after his own fashion and did not care a hang about the wall, "If he does not care a hang about the wall, the wall will spit him out!"

Perhaps it is not at first sight very clear what the "Grande Sœur," here reproduced, has to do with the Panthéon. The little group is of a much earlier date but it was introduced by the artist into the "Rencontre de Sainte Geneviève." Nothing could be more instructive than to compare the whole series of studies and sketches (many of them now at Amiens) which led up from this little picture to the finished panel. Not only costume and colour were gradually modified to fit in with the whole, but by degrees the baby grew heavier; its head fell into a more reposeful position; it was more closely held in the arms of the little mother so tenderly clasping the precious burden to her breast. Puvis is poles asunder from the naturalists who set down their studies from Nature rawly in their pictures, but it is clear that he was not boasting when he said that his finest inspiration had been drawn from Nature.



XXIV. LA GRANDE SŒUR. (The Elder Sister.)

PLATE XXV. L'ENFANCE DE SAINTE GENEVIEVE
(THE CHILDHOOD OF SAINT GENEVIEVE)

A FOURTH panel belonging to this series is independent of the rest. "From her earliest years," says the inscription, "Sainte Geneviève showed signs of ardent piety. She was for ever praying and was the object of the surprise and admiration of all who saw her."

The panel was exhibited in the Salon of 1876.

"Nothing could be simpler," wrote Paul Mantz. "A fresh green April meadow, and in the background a few trees beneath which the child Geneviève is kneeling in the fervour of her instinctive faith; in the foreground are two figures, a labourer and his wife, sturdy peasants both, marvelling at the fullness of this childish heart's communion with God. This simple scene in such a bright setting is like an antique idyll, with prayer added, or, rather, it is the springtime of devotion."

"The conception of the work," said Bonnin, "is in perfect harmony with the feeling which inspired it and which it should impress. . . . But if we examine it further and attempt an analysis we find certain less striking defects side by side with these salient qualities. First of all, the perspective of the landscape is a little too steep, an effect produced by the disproportion of the shepherd in the background. This figure is gigantic, and his great height, which flatly contradicts the idea of distance, brings the section of the picture in which it is painted too near and makes it suddenly rise up to the top of the frame. The kneeling figure of the saint is full of fervour and impulse, though this is indicated by an excessive simplicity of line. And also the painter is to be blamed

for having draped it in too summary a costume. The white linen dress, clothing the saint from neck to heel, is absolutely rudimentary and reminds us of the drapery of that unhappy "Espérance" whose meagre image M. Puvis de Chavannes showed us in the Salon of 1872. The group in the foreground is the best part of the picture. It is drawn with the artist's usual simplicity. It has a certain largeness of outline, full of freshness and force, and a rustic character which is very happily accentuated. . . . The feeling for truth and Nature is very striking and helps the creation of a style which is neither conventional nor commonplace, never trite, and is the result of a very personal interpretation of the subject."



XXV. L'ENFANCE DE SAINTE GENEVIEVE.
(The Childhood of Saint Genevieve.)

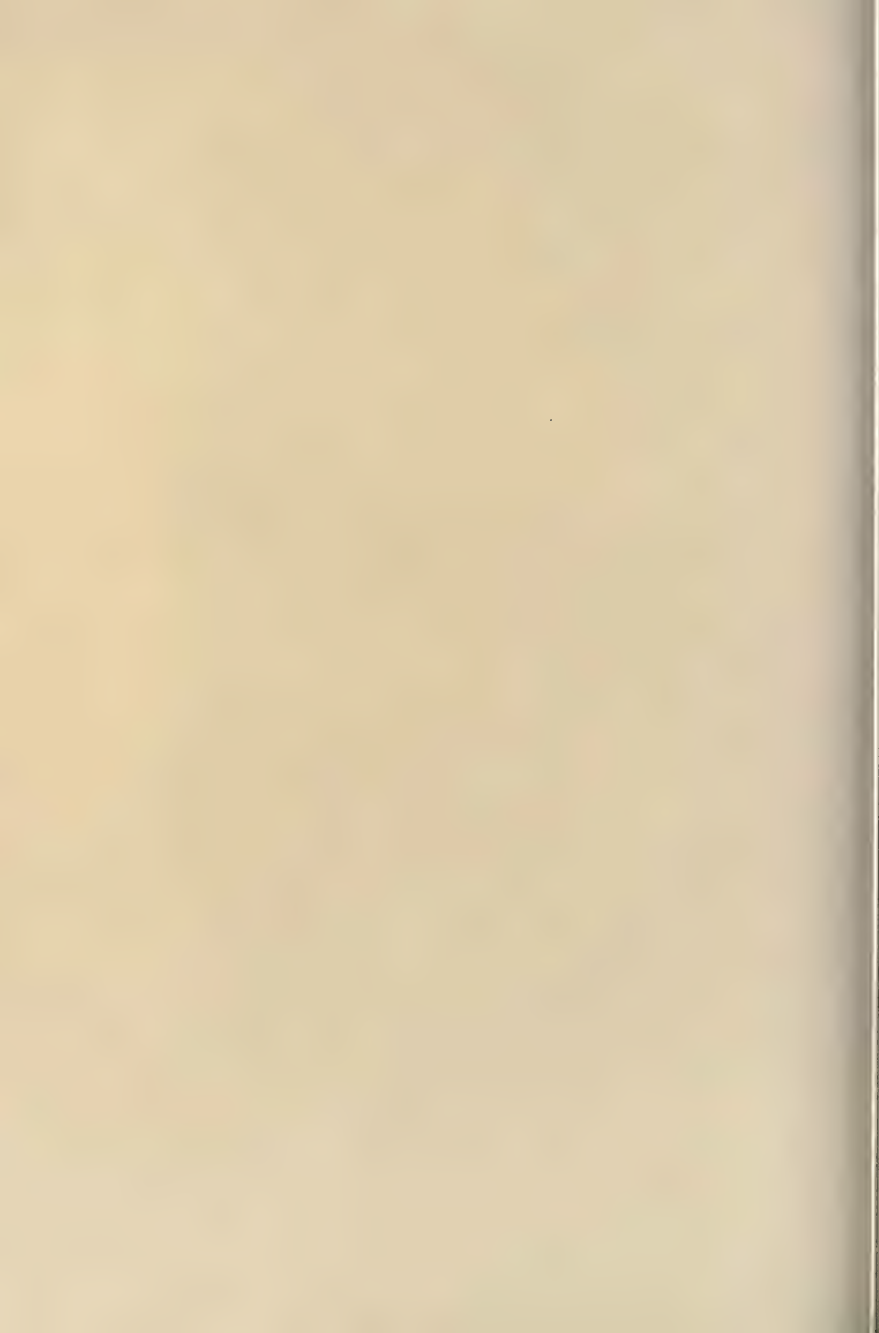


PLATE XXVI. JEUNES FILLES AU BORD DE LA MER (GIRLS BY THE SEA SHORE)

THIS almost unanimous success did not prevent discussion when in the Salon of 1879 Puvis reappeared with the "Enfant Prodigue" and the "Jeunes Filles au Bord de la Mer.

"In these two pictures," wrote Edmond About, "we can find none of the masterly qualities which have given Puvis de Chavannes an honourable position among French decorative painters; they contain nothing but his faults carried to an extreme."

"One admires his efforts," said Huysmans, who was often better inspired, "one would like to praise them, and then—one cannot; in what country, one wonders, do these chlorotic young women live who are here combing their hair with a saw cut out of flint. Where, in what city, in what country do these pale faces exist, that have not even the hectic flush of phthisis in their cheeks? One is simply amazed at this singular collection of girls' faces and their bodies which ought to be imprisoned in the black dresses of pious old women, living in some Balzacian provincial town."

"I am quite ready to admit," wrote Bergerat, "that the painter has produced many pictures as good as this and some better. But what astounding poetry there is here singing and murmuring in this conception that is beyond time, beyond life, a pure fantasy, a chimera."

Paul Mantz was sensible of the "morbid charm," which had gradually won his sympathy. Victor de Swarte once more expressed his "passionate admiration" for the artist and Arthur Bagnières hymns "the intangible grandeur with which he invests all his work."

"In this picture," wrote Véron, "are to be found all the poetry and style of M. Puvis de Chavannes. . . . His first endeavour is to find style in sweeping lines and poses, and then carefully he selects a monochromatic and neutral colour-scheme which shall lend more idealism to his design. As for animating his figures by the circulation of the blood, that is a dead letter for the artist, whose greatest quality is his incontestable originality, the basis of his success and future fame, for it is not given to every man to be himself."

"Les Jeunes Filles" was exhibited subsequently in many retrospective collections. A small replica is now in the Louvre with the Camondo collection. More than twenty-five sketches with sundry slight variations show with what care Puvis applied himself to his search for outline.



XXVI. JEUNES FILLES AU BORD DE LA MER.
(Girls by the Seashore.)

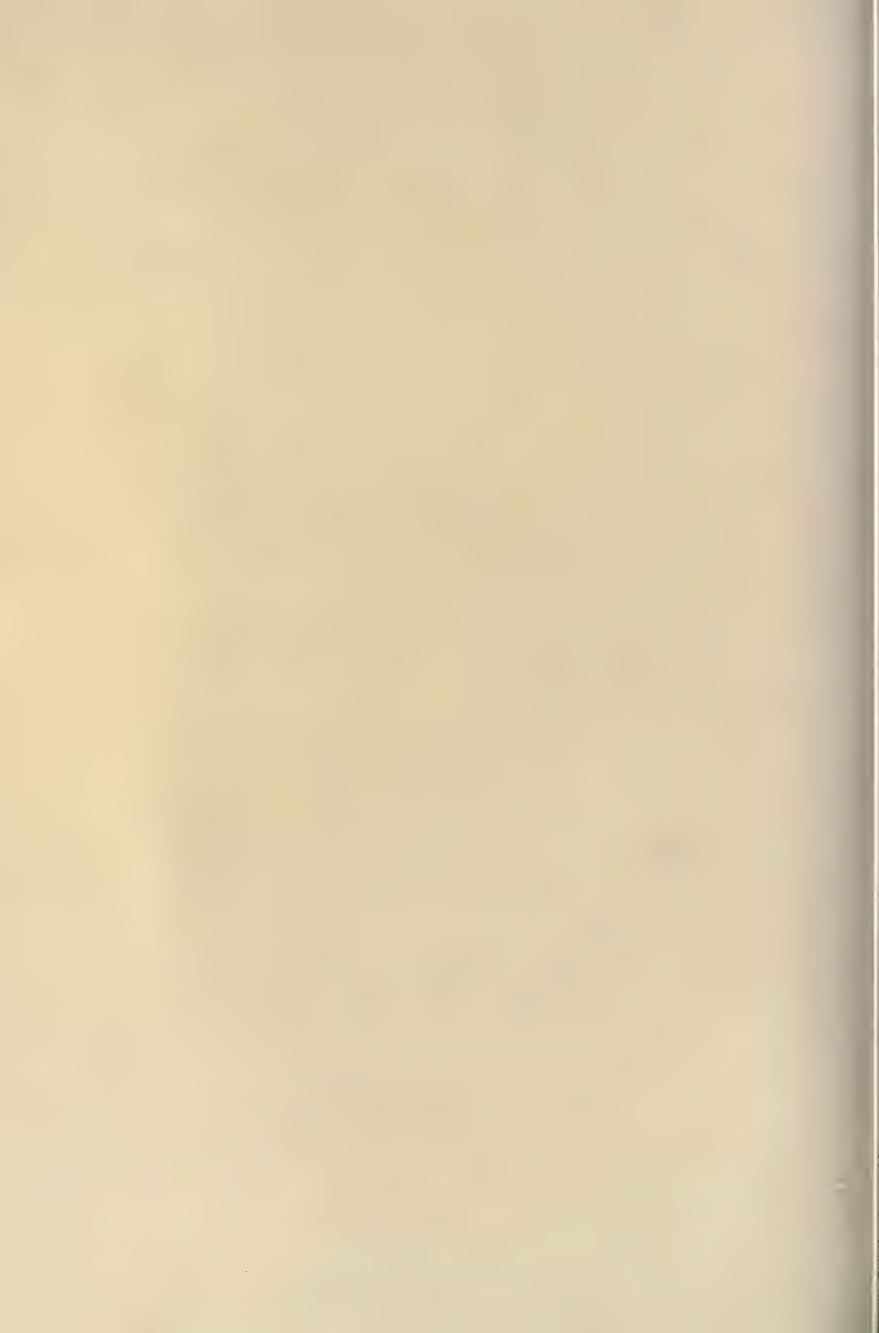


PLATE XXVII. L'ENFANT PRODIGUE (THE PRODIGAL SON)

“  NE day,” says Marius Vachon, “ I told Puvis de Chavannes of an ingenious hypothesis which had constructed a trilogy of Poverty out of his three pictures: ‘Le Pauvre Pêcheur’, ‘ L’Enfant Prodigue ’ and ‘ Le Rêve.’ He laughed and told me that in the second picture he had been chiefly interested in painting the pigs. ‘ In 1878 ’ (the painter explained), ‘ I was staying with my family in the country, and the farmer had been marvellously successful with his pigs that year; he had a great number, and all splendid beasts; I spent a great part of the day in running after them and making sketches. I wanted to make use of them and what better subject could I have than the parable of the Prodigal Son? ’ ”

It would perhaps be rash to take the story literally. Puvis de Chavannes was too modest in feeling to care to see his sentiments translated in the language of the æsthetes. He rather preferred to give the idea that his only guide in the conception of a picture which so subtly moves our inmost feelings was his desire to use one of his sketches. Perhaps he believed it himself. And yet it is hard to admit that he could have so expressed the wretchedness of the Prodigal Son with no other ambition before him save that of “ painting pigs.”

They are good to look at, burrowing with their snouts in the ground, but they only occupy a minor position in this sorrowful poem of degradation, isolation and repentance.

In the Salon of 1879 “ L’Enfant Prodigue ” met with a doubtful reception. “ One admires the artist’s efforts,”

wrote Huysmans, "one would like to praise them, and then—one cannot. . . . Still the same pale colouring, the same fresco appearance; still angular and hard, and as usual one is chilled by the man's pretentious naïveté and affected simplicity, and yet, though he be incomplete, this painter has talent. . . . Though he is up to his neck in a false medium, he struggles bravely, and even attains a certain greatness in this pointless struggle."



XXVII. L'ENFANT PRODIGUE. (The Prodigal Son.)



PLATE XXVIII. LE PAUVRE PECHEUR (THE POOR FISHERMAN)

A DISMAL landscape seen near Honfleur—an immense stretch of water under a dull sky—gave Puvis the idea of his "Pauvre Pêcheur," exhibited in the Salon of 1881. The painter, who was very sensitive to criticism, was "roasted." The memory of this experience remained so vividly with him that he was almost sorry when later on the picture was bought for the Luxembourg.

"'Le Pauvre Pêcheur,'" said Auguste Balluffe, "is a declaration of principle. . . . This fisherman is neither flesh nor fish. He fills the centre of the simulacrum of a picture, in a hint of a boat, drifting down a non-existent river. Really, to give the thing its right name, it is nothing but a shorthand note of a sketch."

Edmond About, with many expressions of deference, declared that the artist was qualified to carry out the classic task of the studios—to illustrate the verse of Racine which represents Hippolytus without form or colour. "The poor fisherman and his poor wife and his poor child, as best they can, fulfil the conditions imposed on them. I bow and pass on, and nothing will induce me to go back."

"It is a crepuscular picture," said Huysmans, "an old fresco, faded by the light of the moon, and washed away by the rain. It is painted in lilac that is nearly white, green mixed with milk, and pale grey. It is dry, hard, and, as usual, of an affected naïve stiffness. I shrug my shoulders at the picture, and am horrified by this travesty of Biblical grandeur . . . ; then in spite of it all I feel a certain pity and indulgence, for it is the

work of a pervert, but it is also the work of a sincere artist who despises the approbation of the public. . . . In spite of the disgust with which the picture fills me when I see it, I cannot help feeling a certain attraction when I am away from it."

Paul Mantz consented to study the picture "on condition that the French school will look at it twice before adopting the new formula. . . . It is a Good Friday picture. All the artists' colourmen have closed their shops; there is no more blue in the sky, no more green in the fields; the Lent fast has become cruel, even men's eyes are forbidden their fare. . . . The river's bank is lifeless earth, with here and there a few yellow flowers. A very thin girl is gathering a bunch of them, though they will have no scent. . . . The sky is pale, the water colourless, and the horizon against which the fisherman stands sharply and sorrowfully outlined, seems to fit in exactly with his melancholy thoughts. . . . And mark how complicated and sometimes contradictory are the things of art; this picture, which hardly exists, is singularly expressive; there is a sorrowful note in the mist, an emotion in the void. Amid the desolation of the surrounding landscape, the fisherman is a striking figure of nakedness, surrender, irremediable wretchedness!"



XXVIII. LE PAUVRE PÊCHEUR. (The Poor Fisherman).

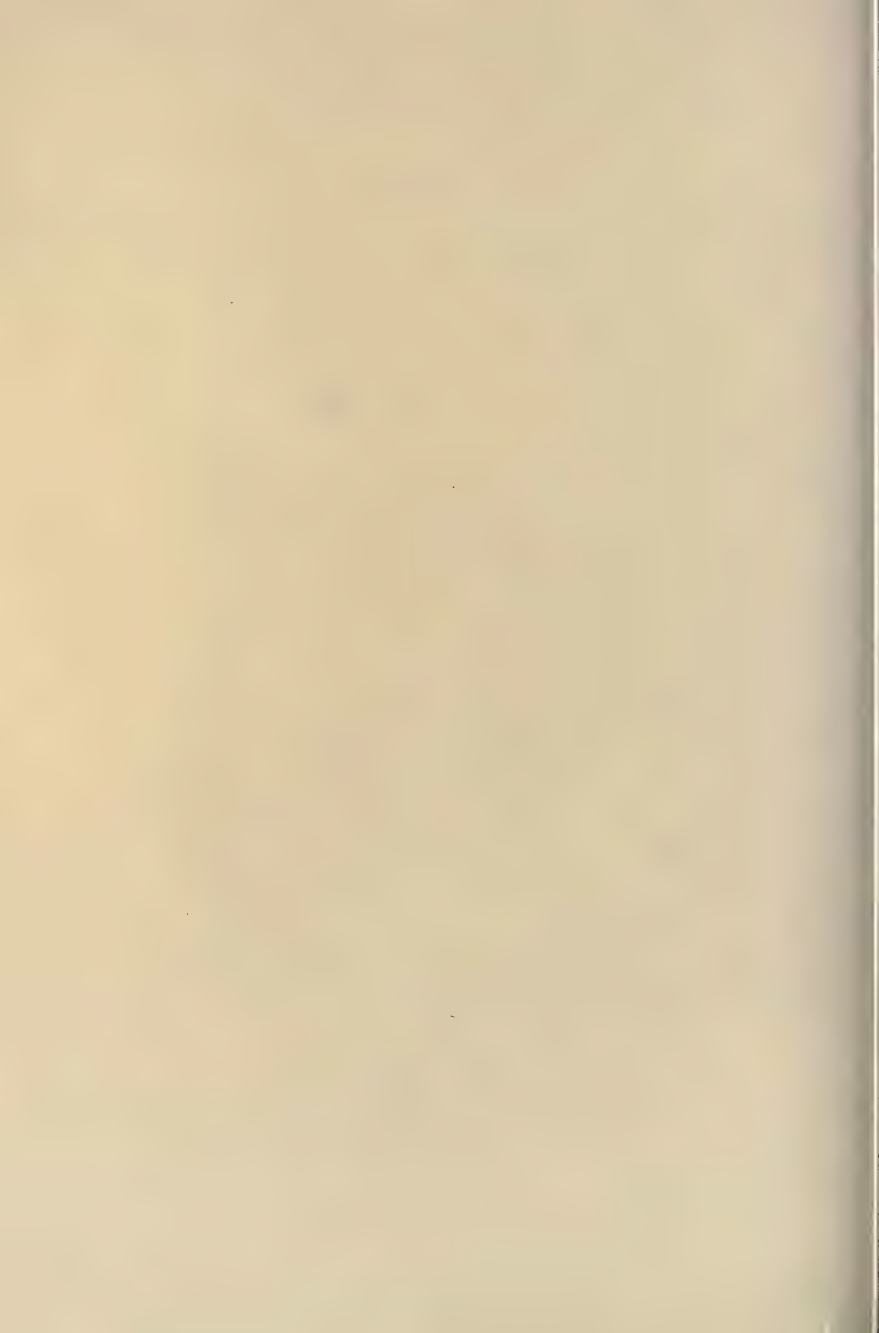


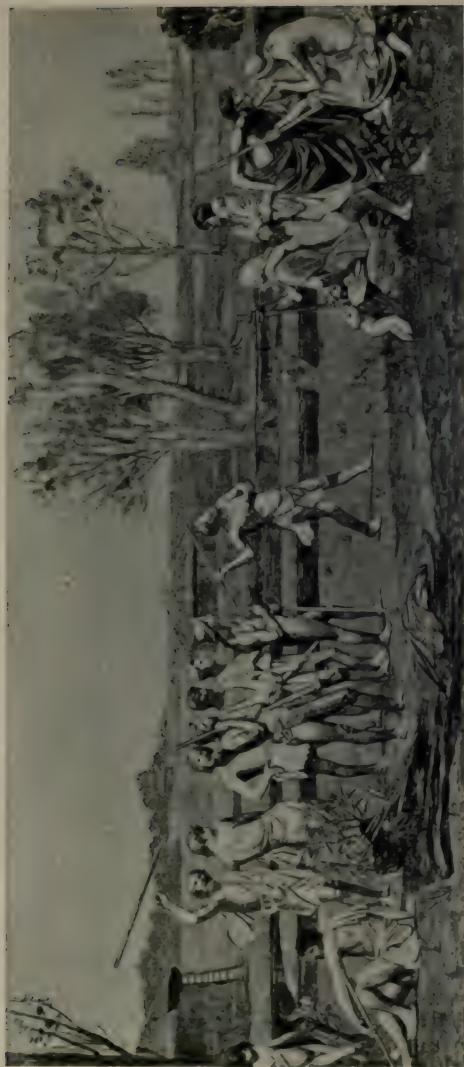
PLATE XXIX. JEUNES PICARDS S'EXERÇANT A LA
LANCE (YOUNG PICARDIANS PRACTISING THE
JAVELIN)

THE principal part of the decoration of the staircase of the Amiens Museum was still left to be done. A great bare wall stared the "Ave Picardia Nutrix" in the face, between "Le Repos" and "Le Travail." The municipality were very anxious for Puvis to finish the work, but the State refused its support.

The artist had to undertake the cartoon at his own risk. It was exhibited in 1880.

"The Salon which contains such an admirable picture," cried Chennevières, "is not an ordinary Salon. The artist who, in the creation of this immense picture, conceived the whole poem of primitive Picardy, with its scanty woods and the vast solitudes of its bogs, its superb groups of young javelin-throwers, as splendid in their noble attitudes as the athletes of ancient Greece, its old swan and heron hunters as wild in mien as their prey, its groups of beautiful girls and children finding relaxation from their rustic cares near the huts of the tribe—the artist who expresses the things of the ideal life with such grandiose simplicity and such instinctive and profoundly just observation of the essentials of nature in human actions and habits is really the product of a great age, and I absolutely ignore the defects which others find in him, for if I found in him the vulgar tricks which pedants regret, he would not be the seeker after supreme poetry, the amazing Georgic, whose virile sobriety is so full of harmony, who charms and delights me to my very depths. And to think that such

a man, a man of such extraordinary worth, because he is himself and lives on the heights, is reduced to filling the leisure which is forced on him in his maturity, after his huge and admirable pictures in the Amiens Museum, after the pictures in the Marseilles Museum, after the frescoes in Saint Geneviève, after his acclamation by every artist, and has to undertake at his own risk the "Lanceurs de Pique" which he planned for the completion of his decoration of the staircase at Amiens! Are there so many Puvis de Chavannes in France! And has the Louvre no monumental staircases, and has the Hôtel de Ville none to hand which could be turned over to the rare good fortune of being utilized by this incomparable decorator? "



XXIX. JEUNES PICARDS S'EXERÇANT A LA LANCE. (Young Picardians practising the Javelin.)

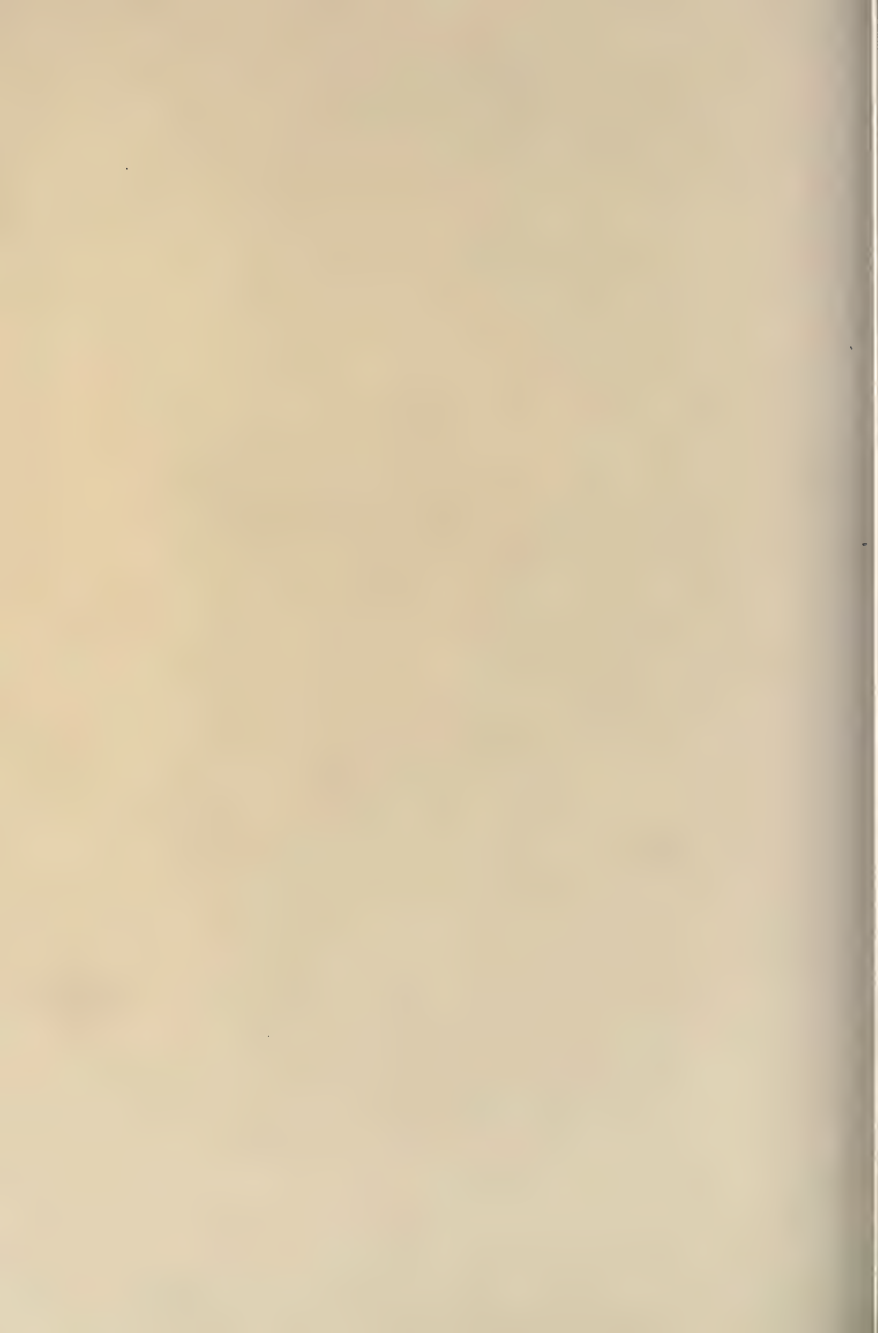


PLATE XXX. LUDUS PRO PATRIA

CHENNEVIÈRE'S appeal awoke a response. After the success of the cartoon the State decided to buy the picture to complete the decoration of the Amiens Museum.

When it was completed it was exhibited in the Salon of 1882 under the title "Ludus pro Patria."

"It is a plain in Picardy," wrote Henry Houssaye, "stretching vast and flat away to the Louzon, broken on one side with the bluish outskirts of a forest. . . . In the centre are a few young men, nude, practising javelin-throwing against the trunk of a dead tree. . . . On the right, standing in front of the Gaulish huts, old men and children are watching the trial of strength and skill, while the women are looking after the evening meal. Some are drawing water; others are baking bread; others are talking. The left part of the picture is filled with a grassy plot, on which are sitting a few young women, one playing with her child, another suckling her baby. A man is bending down to kiss his son, and the boy is responding to his caresses by pulling his beard. . . . In considering such a piece of work . . . it were bad taste to stop to criticize the details. One can only yield to a frank, healthy admiration."

Even now there were a few implacable detractors.

But, generally speaking, the picture was received with the respect it deserved. M. André Michel, who had already written at length about the sketch of the preceding year, now devoted the whole of his first article on the Salon to the artist.

"Only one man," he said, "has been 'worthy of himself' in a picture which we may, with justifiable pride,

leave to posterity. We have written his name at the head of this article, for we wished to dedicate the whole Salon to him. He dominates it from a great height."

The general conclusion was that the name of Puvis de Chavannes was marked out for the medal of honour. And this was the opinion of the most difficult judges to convince—the painter's colleagues.

In considering the "Ludus" we may note a story very characteristic of Puvis's methods. When M. Vachon asked him if he had seen and studied the beautiful landscape of his picture, the painter replied with a smile: "I saw the landscape through a railway carriage window during one of my many journeys to Amiens. . . . My vision of it was so intense that it seemed to me that local observation would have weakened my sensations and would have left me with a reduced, blurred, and lifeless image of it."



XXX. LUDUS PRO PATRIA.



PLATE XXXI. DOUX PAYS (LAND OF TENDERNESS)

IN the Salon of 1882 there was also exhibited a smaller picture, which seems to us now as beautiful as any. This was the "Doux Pays," destined by the painter for the walls of the house of his friend and colleague Léon Bonnat.

Thirty years ago "Le Parlement" published a description of it, which the writer has perhaps forgotten, though the reader will certainly share our pleasure in it. "On a beach," said M. André Michel, "is a group of three women, two sitting, the third standing with her arm leaning on the branch of a fig-tree; further off, down the slope, is an orange grove with its thick foliage speckled with fruit; then comes the blue sea, and on the horizon a line of hills covered with purple mists. Children are playing on the shore; a female figure clothed in white is standing in the foreground, vaguely gazing. In the distance fishermen are drawing in their nets; white sails pass, gently billowing, over the silent sea. A divine serenity descends from the sky, where, in the golden paleness, skim lilac-tinted clouds. The landscape is grand and gentle. One floats in it as in a happy dream; one cannot tear oneself away from it. The memory of the enchanted hours, when with calm and noble delight, one tasted the sweetness of living and believed in happiness with no hereafter, and joys without bitterness, and built up anew the lovely pagan dream, sweetly fills one's heart. It is an enchantment; all thought of analysis, of explanation, of criticism, is gone; one tastes the supreme happiness of surrendering to the immediate impression, and marvelling 'like a beast.'

"Let us, however, consider the means by which the

painter has given us such delight. Very simple, tranquil lines, with hardly a curve; very simple attitudes; the two women lying down are clothed in pale blue and tobacco-coloured tunics; those standing up are in white; the draperies are very soberly and broadly treated; the design is deliberately simplified and synthetized, the modelling is very summary. In one corner is a branch of rose-laurel in flower; near the women is a basket of oranges; a red flower is deliciously poised in one woman's brown hair; that is all. Nothing disturbs the sovereign harmony of the whole; no detail strikes a false note; a soft silvery atmosphere carelessly envelops sea, shore and sky. It is a universal andante, naïvely grave and profoundly sweet. It is impossible more happily to combine freshness and sincerity of inspiration with will-power, more surely to attain great art, not by vain school formulæ, but by free interpretation of Nature, whose forms and combinations the artist has systematically modified in order to translate into a language of which he is inventor and master the delights of his most inward dream."



XXXI. DOUX PAYS. (The Land of Tenderness.)

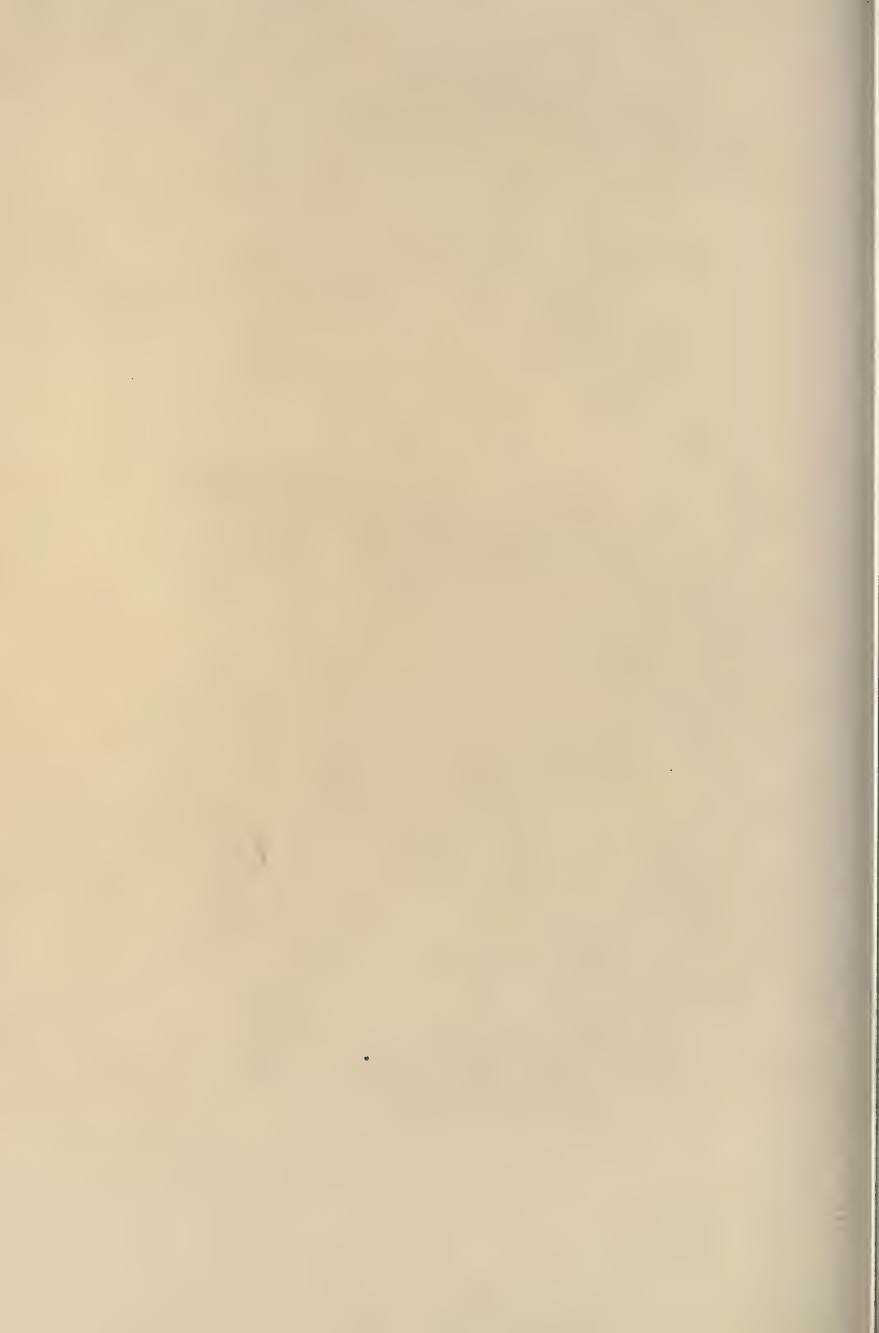


PLATE XXXII. LE REVE (THE DREAM)

IN the Salon of 1883 were exhibited the portrait of Mme M . . . C . . . , which we shall consider later, and "Le Rêve," which had this note against it in the catalogue: "He sees in his sleep Love, Glory and Riches appearing."

About abandoned irony and waxed wrath and wrote a furious and often quoted article:

"When Hell wants its roads mending like the Champs Elysées, no doubt it will entrust the undertaking to M. Puvis de Chavannes. This artist is, above all, a man of good intentions, one might even say of great intentions and vast ideas. For the last twenty years he has been promising himself and us a masterpiece which he will never carry out; for he can neither paint nor draw, and he is perpetually parading his encyclopædic ignorance in every corner of the realm of art. There is, unhappily, no means of supplying his lack of early training; neither courage, nor perseverance, nor even a certain elevation of mind can help the dreamer who has never been to an elementary school, never had the faintest notion of prosody, or even of common spelling to produce an epic poem in twelve cantos."

And in a final effort to arrest the growing fame of his former friend, the faithful champion of Baudry went on in these terms:

"The two pictures which M. Puvis de Chavannes is exhibiting this year with a negative success are not inferior in craftsmanship to those huge contrivances which kindly criticism has called masterpieces and the incompetence of the Government has rewarded out of all proportion. 'Le Rêve' and 'Le Portrait' are the pro-

ducts of an art so childish, that, but for the artist's signature the most lenient jury would have rejected them. Any young man who could paint that lugubrious dummy with those three grotesque dolls, any child who could model a face and hands like those of Mme M C and the black drapery daubed in with a blacking-brush, would never be allowed inside the Ecole des Beaux Arts, or even the school in the Avenue Trudaine. But you will see that M. Puvis de Chavannes's champions will not consider themselves beaten, and will go on bolstering up this great intentionist as a master; that they will lasso pupils and imitators for him and will lead him in triumph to the very doors of the 'Institut.' When that day comes there will be only one thing to do to celebrate it—soak all the pictures in the Louvre in saltpetre and turn them into torches."



XXXII. LE REVE. (The Dream.)



PLATE XXXIII. ORPHEE (ORPHEUS)

THE same date, 1883, is inscribed on a picture which we should much like to pass over without comment: it has no history and its subject is one of those which the artist disliked to see embellished with words. However, we must stop to consider it since there is a certain tendency—backed up by Puvis himself—to substitute for the old conception of him as an anæmic and vague artist, the portrait of him as a “bon vivant” and “rude Burgundian,” which is almost equally false in its incompleteness.

Our painter's work and life were anything but those of a weakly man. And yet it is not untrue to say, that in spite of his energy and vigour, he did not escape the disease of the century, when we consider his confession, at the beginning and end of his career, that the melancholy with which his most serene pictures are tempered was deeply rooted in his soul.

“The Musset and Senancour contagion does not count for nothing in my work,” he wrote in 1861 to Mme Nicolas Belby. “I am like that, and so melancholy that the sun tires my eyes and troubles my soul, especially the autumn sun, which shines so persistently and gives so little warmth. . . .

“And then who is there in this world that has not a past? And is it not always sad, since it is past?

“Here are three beautiful lines:

‘Nature, serene of brow, how you forget!

How in your ceaseless changes you still destroy

The mysterious threads that bind our hearts together.’

“Hugo said that, and sometimes they make me cry.

Things that are implacably beautiful are for men more finely tempered than I."

And thirty years later, in 1894, he confessed: "These sudden signs of autumn make me infinitely sad. Never has life appeared so dream-like as to-day. The year is already going down to its death and it seems to have existed for me only in a few days here and there. If I had not material proof in my work that it has had its proper number of days and hours I should doubt whether I had lived it. Such a sensation is incomprehensible to the young, but at my age it is brutal and merciless."

Very rarely, even among his intimates, did Puvis let such a cry of despair and agony escape him as is here expressed in his "Orpheus," and it was as well. But a few table anecdotes Gallically salted no more convey a portrait of the man than his albums of caricatures—often very amusing—give any idea of his work.



XXXIII. ORPHÉE. (Orpheus.)

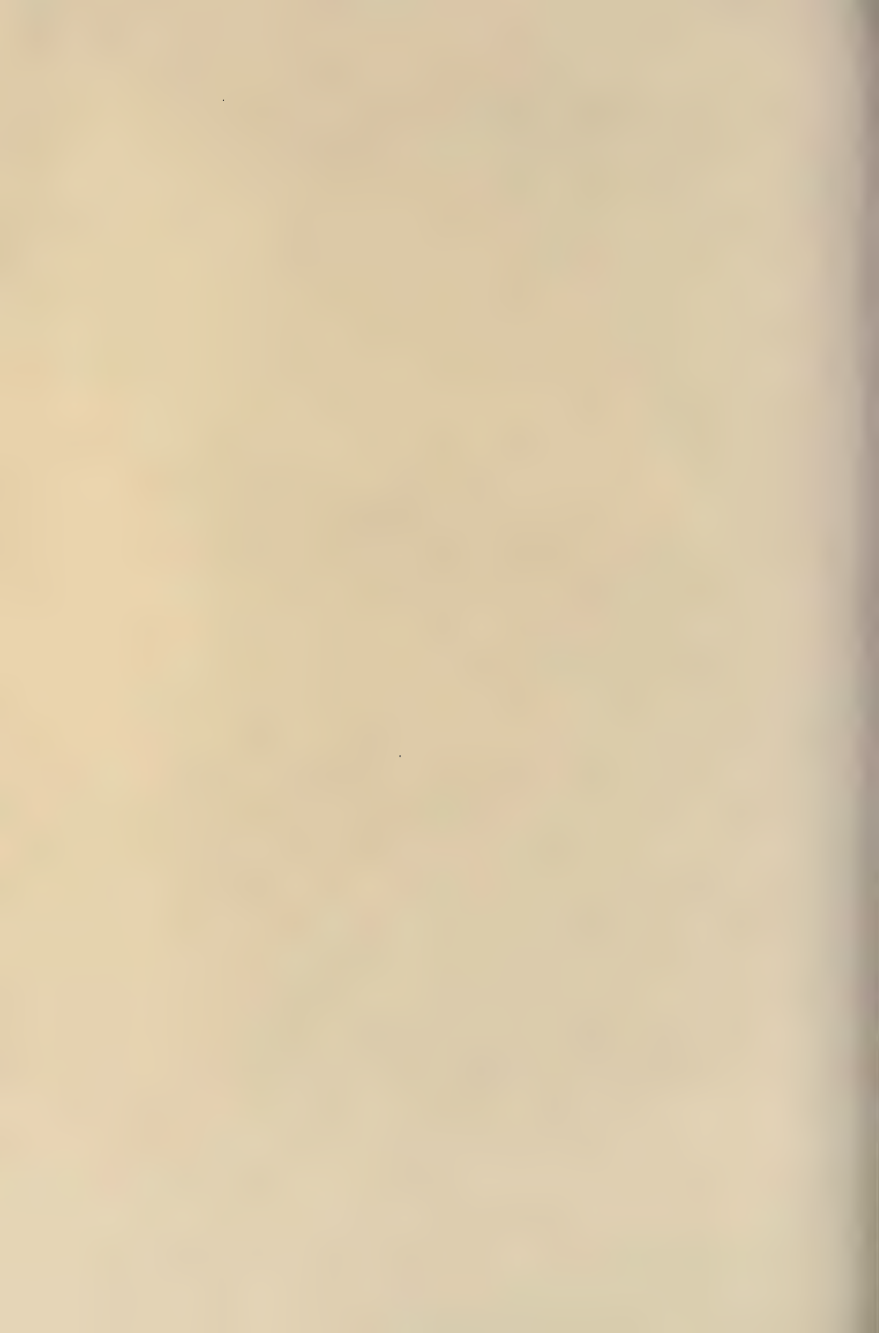


PLATE XXXIV. MARIE CANTACUZENE

PUVIS was still unknown when at the house of Théodore Chassériau he met the woman who was to be his life-long friend.

Merely to feel the emotion roused in those who knew her by the name of Princesse Cantacuzène is to renounce any attempt to draw a worthy portrait of her. An exquisite pencil drawing by Chassériau (1855) and Puvis's admirable masterpiece (painted and exhibited in 1883 and again in 1889 and now in the Lyons Museum) make it superfluous to say anything of her noble simplicity, her lofty intelligence and greatness of heart. Her whole life was one of self-effacement and self-abnegation. "You go to see her to console her," said Cazin, "and it is she who consoles you."

She was a little older than Puvis and gave him a passionate unswerving affection, capable of every sacrifice which her friend's ardent temperament might demand. There was only one woman in the world capable of such constant self-renunciation to the life of an artist which was mercilessly subordinated to his work.

When she had helped, both actively and by her discreet sympathy and confidence, in the conception of a new picture, and when some of her expressive attitudes and beautiful grave features had become a part of it, she would be moved to tears when Puvis made her share the praises of their friends.

It was only very late in the day that circumstances allowed the artist to give the Princess his name. He had the great sorrow of seeing her depart this life before him.

"What shall I say of my poor sick wife?" he wrote in August, 1898. "Her life is ebbing away from day to day,

hour by hour, drop by drop. I never leave the house: I must be there for her to see me—for she is so weak that she cannot speak to me.”

And a few days later: “Sorrowful nights are followed by sorrowful days, during which with my soul at stretch I watch the passing of my remaining life. It is better so—I prefer to suffer alone.”

Puvis only survived her by two months. The brush fell from his hands as he finished the picture in which the features of Mme Puvis de Chavannes are glorified, the picture in which his devotion and “pious solicitude” are so touchingly incarnate: “Sainte Geneviève veillant sur la Ville endormie.”



XXXIV. MARIE CANTACUZÈNE.

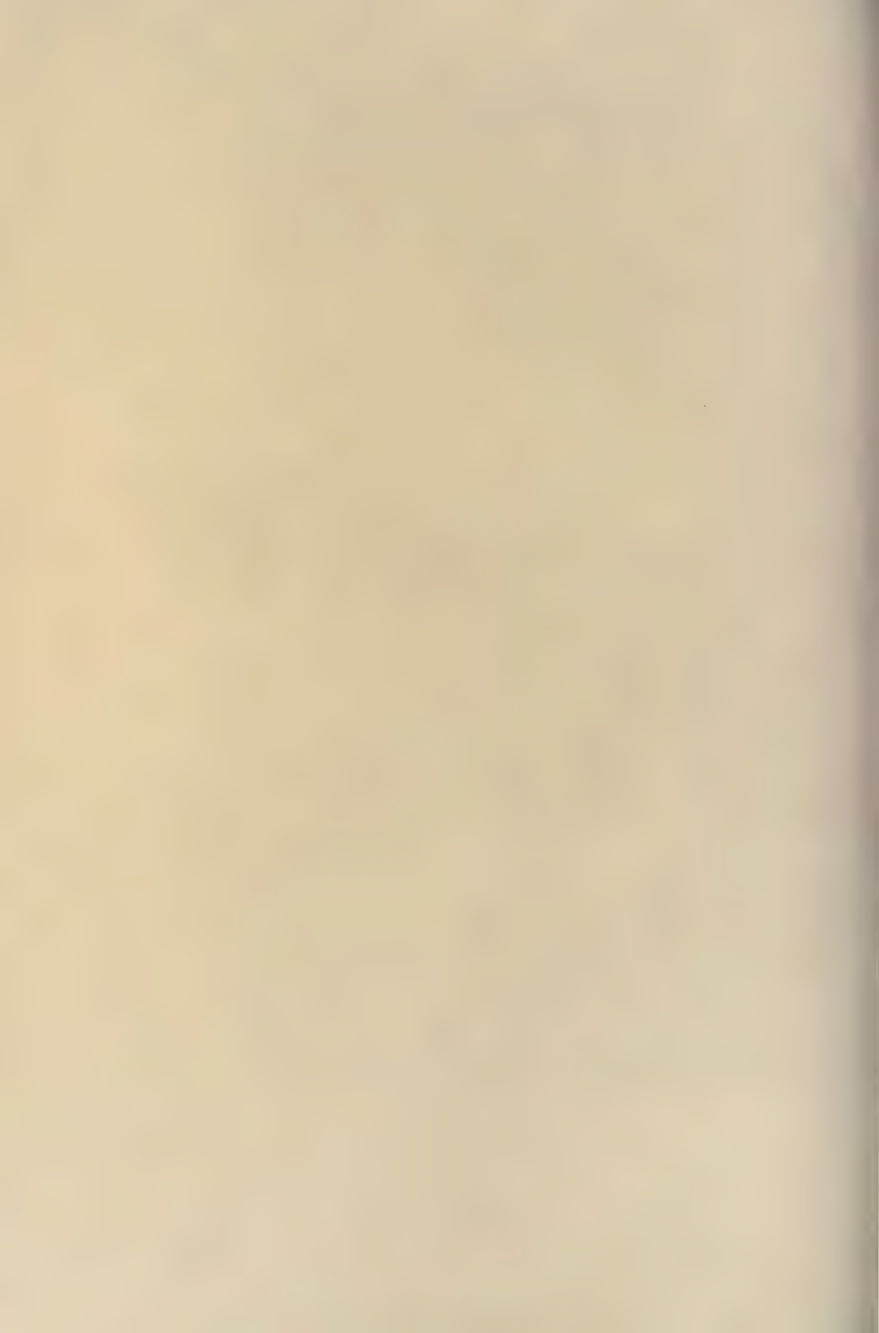


PLATE XXXV. LE BOIS SACRE (THE HOLY WOOD)

ON the initiative of the Administrative Committee of Museums, Puvis was commissioned in 1883 to paint a series of pictures for the staircase of the Palais des Arts at Lyons.

The first picture of this series, the largest and most powerfully conceived perhaps that Puvis ever painted, was shown in the Salon of 1884 with the title: "Le Bois Sacré cher aux Arts et aux Muses."

The two outside portions are unfortunately gone. It is perhaps the only instance of a picture by the artist losing by being hung in its destined position. And it is all the more regrettable inasmuch as his contemporaries have preserved an unforgettable memory of their first impression.

"A great lake," wrote M. André Michel, "reflects a golden sky only, a thin strip of which is shown above a line of mountains, purple-blue, on the horizon. Between these two colours, the blue of the mountains and the golden water of the lake, are gently sloping meadows starred with rare flowers, yellow and white narcissus, and trees with straight slender trunks, pines, oaks and laurels; lower down in the valley is the whispering and dying murmur of the darker leaves of a dense wood. . . . A sweet all-pervading harmony slowly reaches you and the figures who inhabit these dream regions then seem like gladly expected guests. . . . They are born for contemplation and dreams. Nothing vulgar or base can enter this happy retreat where noble, manly, and serene thoughts seem to hover in the air. It gives an incommunicable impression; a mysterious sense of satisfaction fills the landscape with sweet solemnity.

Only a poet could have dreamed this dream and painted it." After noticing a few doubtful details, the writer adds: "But the whole impression is so strong and so gently persuasive that the desire to criticize grows less the more one looks at it and one begins to wonder whether it would not break the spell if a single detail was changed in the wonderful whole, which is so systematically contrived, so wonderfully balanced, that every note in it answers to all the rest and rings out in an all-penetrating harmony. . . ."

It would be pleasant to quote the pages of MM. Geoffroy, Roger Marx, Marius Vachon, Henry Houssaye, Aignard, to show how after the misunderstandings of the first few years all the connoisseurs came to respond to the artist's emotions. Even those who, like M. de Fourcand, would have preferred a more national subject to such a classical theme, something more impregnated with humanity and reality, like the "Sainte Geneviève," were won over by the brilliant harmony of colour and the "indefinable feeling of rest and freshness."

To these M. Péladan retorts that by treating a hackneyed subject without having recourse to the antique or to the primitives Puvis had given the exact measure of his originality. "When one compares," he says "the 'Bois Sacré' with all the other exhibits, one is forced unreservedly to proclaim Puvis de Chavannes the greatest master of our time."



XXXV. LE BOIS SACRÉ. (The Holy Wood.)

PLATE XXXVI. VISION ANTIQUE (A VISION OF ANCIENT DAYS)

"**L**E Bois Sacré cher aux Arts et aux Muses," explained Puvis in the catalogue of 1886, "was the germ of two other pictures, 'Vision Antique' and 'Inspiration Chrétienne,' art being comprised within these two terms, of which the first evokes the idea of Form and the other the idea of Feeling. A fourth panel represents 'Le Rhône et la Saône,' symbolizing Force and Grace."

In his pictures in the Lyons Museum therefore the artist summed up his conception of art. But that criticism has been bandying the word for the last twenty years one might say that these four pictures are eminently synthetic. In a few precious lines expressing his intentions Puvis admits us to his ideas, as sober as they are lofty and broad, and as far removed from literary complication as from literal naturalism. They are the ideas of an artist and not those of a philosopher gone astray.

Neither are they so remote as the catalogue might lead us to suppose with its antithesis of Form and Feeling. Like its neighbours the "Vision Antique" has the usual colouring of Puvis's dreams.

"La Vision Antique," writes M. G. Geoffroy, "is the appearance in a very limited landscape veiled by the mist of a hot day, of the rhythmic poetry and the heroic movements of ancient Greece. The earth is everywhere pierced by rock; flowers and little shrubs are growing in the crannies; a temple of very beautiful proportions is built on a summit; a blue sea washes the shores and the sunlit promontories. With extraordinary sureness

of brushwork, and an amazing juxtaposition of simple tones, the background, the distances, the contours and the very texture of the stones are shown in a free air in which the eyes of the spectator can roam at will, come and go, stop and get lost. Along the shore of the Ionian Sea a troop of armed horsemen go galloping by, galloping rhythmically like the horses and men of the frieze of the Parthenon. . . . The women in the foreground are not such evident proof of an understanding of antiquity; they have the attitudes of Greece and the rigid features of the statues, but in this joyous place they seem to be living isolated and unhappy existences. They are lying on the ground, or standing with their heads in their hands; they are weary and filled with lassitude; their sad eyes are wandering vaguely as they dream."



XXXVI. VISION ANTIQUE. (Vision of Ancient Days.)

PLATE XXXVII. INSPIRATION CHRETIENNE
(CHRISTIAN INSPIRATION)

“**U**NDER the arches of a romanesque cloister,” wrote M. Ponsonailhe in 1886, “M. Puvis de Chavannes has painted the antithesis of the ‘Vision Antique’; ‘L’Inspiration Chrétienne,’ that other source of modern art, of the art of all time with regard to sentiment. The last light of the day tinges the cloisters where a painter-monk is decorating the walls. We can see a fragment of his pious work. It is a Christ in the garden of olives . . . gently rejecting the chalice of gall born by three cherubim; on one side the beginning of a procession of the blessed saints with golden haloes. . . . At the foot of the ladder leading to the scaffolding the religious painter is moving forward, brush in hand, lost in dreams. . . . A few clerks, and a few laymen have become his pupils. . . . In the foreground a boy is looking for some drawings in a portfolio. He is kneeling near a bench on which is a lily, emblematic flower of the gardens of Sharon, the white petals of which were made by God himself. On the opposite side of the picture are three monks in white gowns and black woollen hoods. . . . The background of the picture is a court the gate of which is open to a few beggars: an old man is having his wounds tended by a monk . . . ; a woman is receiving alms and a child is held in the arms of a monk. . . .

“The wall of the cloister is not so high as altogether to conceal the country outside. But this glimpse of the world outside is not such as to stop prayers on pious lips. A cemetery, sad and austere, is on the slope of a hill. A few cypress trees rear their spears of an unchanging

green. Beyond are arid lofty mountains, . . . a dull green sky silvered by the pale crescent moon. Thus nothing can disturb the peace of soul sought in the monastery by its inmates, or the oblivion of the past and the contemplation of the future which is the aim of monastic life. Should the painter's eyes wander from his inward vision, . . . and turn to the country, its cypress trees, straight as the mystic candles of the altar will make him think of the graves at their feet. . . ."

Among the principal characters, whose description we have had to curtail, we must remark the pupil leaning against the wall, to whom Puvis gave the features of his compatriot Flandrin.

A reduced replica, here reproduced, was, as in many other cases, commissioned by M. Durand-Ruel. A little preliminary sketch, now in the possession of M. Paul Baudouin, deserves to be as well known as the finished picture, for it contains all its delicate sensitiveness of vision and sentiment.



XXXVII. INSPIRATION CHRÉTIENNE (Christian Inspiration.)

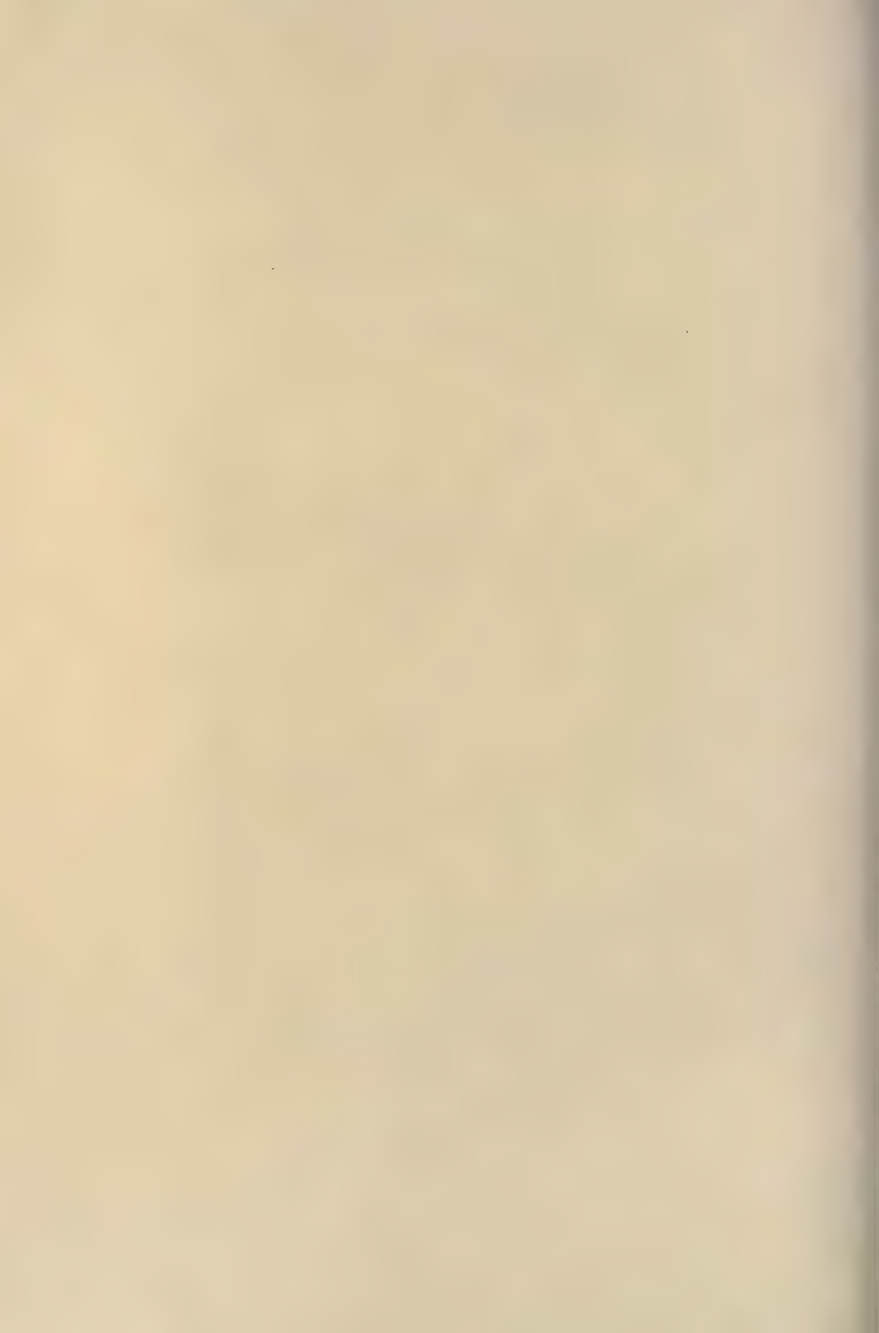


PLATE XXXVIII. LE RHONE ET LA SAONE

THIS picture was exhibited with the two preceding panels in the Salon of 1886 and is now over the entrance door of the Fine Arts Gallery in the Lyons Museum.

"It represents," says Alfred de Lostalot, "the confluence of the Rhône and the Saône in an ideal landscape, very markedly French in character, and of an irresistible charm. Two nude figures, substantial in form this time and very near natural truth, are in the foreground; they are allegorical of the Rhône and the Saône but the catalogue tells us that we are to take them also to mean Force and Grace. We do not contradict that."

As A. de Lostalot remarked, the picture is more strongly natural in tone than usual. The landscape, in particular, is one of the first which can be localized. Puvis had a passionate love for the Rhône, "which takes on the colour of the silvery mists of the Lyonnais sky, a light, transparent gauze which veils but does not conceal the beauty of the mystical and industrious city."

M. Vachon, from whom we have just quoted, adds a few lines by the artist which are full of his love for his native country: "I often think of our great river Rhône," wrote the master to a friend, "How often have I been fain to take the train and go and steep myself in the beauty of its wide horizons; but it is a dream, like so much else."

When he went to Lyons Puvis always walked along the banks of the river. One day when he took two of his pupils with him, as Arsène Alexandre narrates, "after a silence and long contemplation which seemed to portend some epic vision, he said, 'This is the place

where, when I was at school, I loved to play ducks and drakes! Ah! I don't think I could do it so well now. . . . ' And he stooped and picked up some flat pebbles and sent them bravely skimming and hopping over the water. People stopped to look at the gentleman, with his rosette of the Legion of Honour in his coat, playing ducks and drakes. The passers-by gaped. A number of little boys ran up and critically watched his performance. Chavannes was as happy as a God."

The anecdote is not exactly indispensable to the understanding of the Lyons pictures, but a little game of ducks and drakes is permissible—as Puvis tells us—even in the purlieus of the Sacred Wood.



XXXVIII. LE RHÔNE ET LA SAÔNE.

PLATE XXXIX. LA SORBONNE.

THE days when the artist had to do his work at his own risk were now far behind. Hardly had he finished the Lyons series than he was commissioned to paint the vast frieze on the back wall of the great amphitheatre of the new Sorbonne built by M. Nénot. And on this occasion the artist was very near refusing the commission.

The price offered for this colossal undertaking, thirty-five thousand francs, was no great inducement. Further the subject did not much attract the painter, who was very uncompromising in these matters, and in other circumstances had already refused to accept a proposal which did not give him a free hand. Puvis, it is said, had already written a letter of refusal, which was kept back through the intervention of a friend. He promised to think it over for three days, and this had the desired effect, for reflection enabled him to see the good use he could make of his subject.

And here are the essential lines in his own words: "In a clearing in a sacred wood, sitting on a block of marble, the Sorbonne; on each side of her are two geniuses carrying palm-branches; at her feet is a bubbling spring. On her right, Literature; Eloquence standing up; Poetry represented by the muses in various attitudes on the turf; History and Archæology are rummaging in the past; Philosophy is discussing the mystery of Life and Death; on the left are the Sciences; Geology, Physiology, Botany, Chemistry symbolized by their attributes; Physics is half opening her veils to a host of young men offering her an electric spark as the premisses of their work; in the shade of a little wood Geometry is pondering a problem."

One of the principal elements of the picture is the admirable landscape, the majestic ordering of which we are here forced to show only in fragments. As usual it was built up out of nothing. "I broke off a little twig from an oak," wrote Puvis in 1888, "and in my picture it has grown into a great tree." And, another day, when he was showing M. Durand-Tabier a pine-branch nailed to the wall of his studio, the painter said: "That is the forest in the Sorbonne." And M. Paul Baudouin once found in the drawer in which he kept various souvenirs of his master and friend, a few little shells, a few pieces of crystal, a piece of coral, all of which were translated on to canvas, grown out of all recognition, and he characterized this rare power of ennobling everything in a neat phrase: "Chavannes saw his Virgilian epics and landscapes in his daily journey from the Place Pigalle to the Boulevard Boileau."



XXXIX. LA SORBONNE.

PLATE XL. LA SORBONNE (THE SCIENCES)

TO grasp the artist's intentions it is necessary to augment the note already quoted with the commentary published in the catalogue of the Salon of 1887—when the cartoon was exhibited—and also a long conversation reported by M. Vachon.

Both agree in showing the importance which Puvis attached to the allegorical structure of his picture. This is not the place in which to ask, as Bürger and Castagnary did, whether that was their merit and power. But even those to whom any allegory, however free it may be of scholastic dryasdust, does impede and rather cool the pleasure of eyes and heart, will admit the reflective spirit which controls these intellectual structures. The group of the Sciences was thus explained to M. Vachon: “. . . . Could I do better than to depict Geology and the Sea as two female figures with their bodies simply veiled with a transparent gauze which allows their beauty to be admired. One of them, crowned with a diadem of coral, carries a conch-shell in her hand; the other, decked with precious stones, is holding a piece of rock-crystal. Mineralogy, an old woman, as old as the world, but solid, built of chalk and sand, is sitting on the ground, leaning against a piece of rock in which is a fossil shell. Botany has a bunch of flowers in her lap. A child, with a scalpel in his hand, is trying to catch a lizard to study it, while another is eagerly examining a microbe culture in a bottle. Physics is a sort of mysterious Isis, who unveils only to the ardent, enthusiastic, convinced, initiate: I have placed her on a tall pedestal, like a goddess; a group of young men with one impulse

are vowing their allegiance to her. The mathematical sciences will be three men absorbed in the study of a geometrical problem."

But if we may be tempted to deduce from these intellectual preoccupations that Puvis was inclined to pontificate over his contemporaries, we must turn to a private letter for the eagerly told narrative of the solemn inauguration of the Sorbonne in 1889, upon the occasion of which he was honoured with the Commander's cross.

"... The ceremony over, as the song says, I felt awkward enough for I had heard from the ministry that morning that the President of the Republic was going to give me a decoration. Well, the 'Marseillaise' came to an end, the crowd disappeared, the President vanished. I had to follow the general example and had just reached the door when M. Gréard, who had been looking for me, caught hold of me, and—quite by chance!—we found ourselves in the room reserved for distinguished persons. M. Fallières took the casket, handed it to M. Carnot, who gave it to me with a few words too kind to be repeated here. M. Lozé put the ribbon round my neck, and there was another commander added to the list. But there was not a single mirror in which I could see myself: what bad luck!"



XL. LA SORBONNE : LES SCIENCES. (The Sorbonne : The Sciences.)

PLATE XLI. INTER ARTES ET NATURAM

"**A**FTER all these kindnesses," added Puvis, "I shall have to reorganize my life, and that is not so easy."

The feeling of the passage of time had been particularly painful to the artist in the year 1889 when he had to serve on the jury of the Universal Exhibition. Nothing irritated him so much as these committees which wasted the hours he had to steal from his work. "As for my health," he wrote at this time, "I fancy the best cure would be a new canvas to fill honourably. A man does not with impunity change a life of work for the forced inaction to which I have been for some time condemned."

The new canvas was filled for the Salon of 1890. It now hangs on the staircase of the Rouen Museum and, although we may prefer many of the master's other pictures, it is hard, in that museum, to escape the desire to leave the galleries with their wealth of masterpieces and studious achievements to stand by this open window and breathe the pure air and the poetry that come through it.

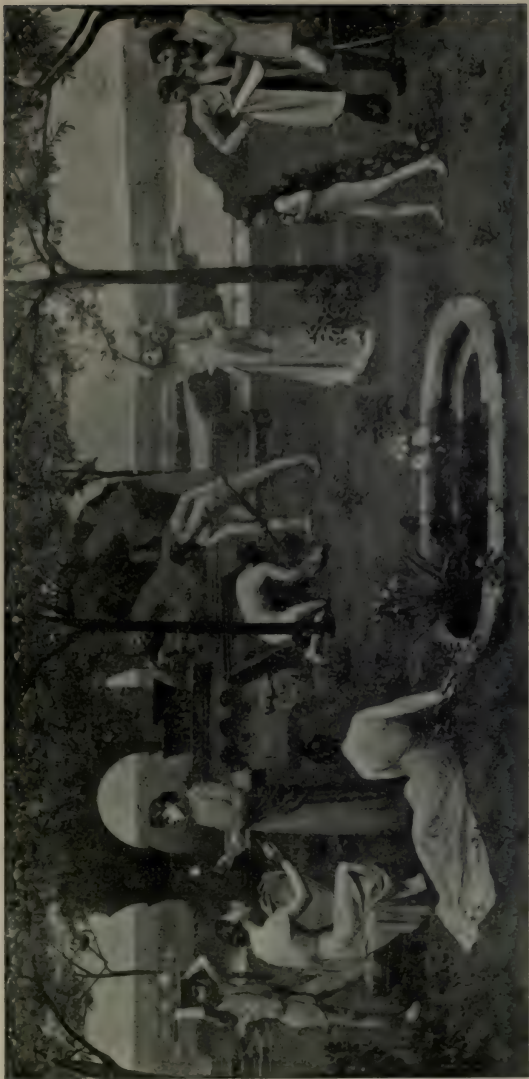
We are shown the admirable panorama of Rouen seen from the heights above the Seine in the direction of Bon-Secours. But over the ugly chalky mounds of the foreground the master has built a terrace—which has since been constructed on the identical spot by the municipality—sheltered with apple-trees in blossom, and furnished with noble ruins, newly excavated, and refreshed by a pool in which water-plants are growing.

"On the right," wrote M. J. Péladan in 1890, "is a female figure holding a piece of pottery and a girl in

violet is giving her a flower to copy; in the background are nude male figures digging; on the left a group of artists and idealists, and, almost in the centre, a little masterpiece in a great, is a child dragging a swag of leaves. . . .

"I do not think it possible to resist the charm of this fresco or to dispute its supremacy over all the other exhibits. . . . The attitudes are those of bas-relief, blotted out by a dominant light; the perfect harmony of means and end is so fine that we are forced to acquiesce in an enormous proposition. M. de Chavannes has grouped together, nude male figures, men in coats, women in draperies and women in modern dress all in the same setting, and he has been able to do this with the aid of one thing only: style."





XLI. INTER ARTES ET NATURAM. (Central Panel.)

PLATE XLII. LA NORMANDIE

THE decoration of the staircase of the Rouen Museum contains two panels, "La Poterie" and "La Ceramique" (1891), in addition to the great fresco "Inter Artes et Naturam." These panels were as much a tribute to the glory of the old Rouen factories as to the important collection of pottery in the Museum.

In these three pictures it was a surprise to find Puvis boldly introducing modern costume. Till then his example had been set up as a reason for banishing it from decorative painting, though there was nothing in Puvis's work to justify such drastic proscription.

Like many artists, Delacroix for instance, he had only a limited sympathy with his own generation and had no desire to glorify it in his work. But his rather disdainful indifference had a more profound origin than a superstitious respect for the past. He was never tempted to set on canvas any scene just as he had seen it. He only borrowed from reality the bare elements necessary to give body to his dreams. There came from his hand hardly more portraits than "landscapes" proper. (There are hardly more than two or three outside those here reproduced.) Once, about 1880, he was attracted by the idea of painting a gathering of his friends and pupils in his studio at Neuilly. But the scheme never got beyond a few charcoal drawings, which are very beautiful in themselves; the picture was left roughly sketched out and is only intelligible to those who knew the originals.

It was not because he had too closely studied, as had been said of him, the engravings in the "Cabinet des

Estampes," that Puvis most often used the nude and drapery. It was his unchanging system to avoid all particularity, everything that could draw attention from the main feeling of the picture and obscure the intelligibility of human action. A closer scrutiny of his work will show how gradually among the antique draperies there appeared garments of a more humble and more plastic character. Could there be anything less antique than the vague "peignoir" of the "Espérance" or the rags of the "Enfant Prodigue" and the "Pauvre Pêcheur?" From the time when he discovered how to dress "Sainte Geneviève" or "Fra Angelico" after his own fashion, there was nothing to prevent his simplifying and generalizing modern costume to make it suited to his work. That is what happened quite early in his career, shortly after 1870, in "Le Ballon" and "Le Pigeon Voyageur." And he repeated it very frequently about the time of the Rouen pictures, in several unfamiliar little canvases like "La Normandie," reproduced on the opposite page.



XLII. LA NORMANDIE. (Normandy.)

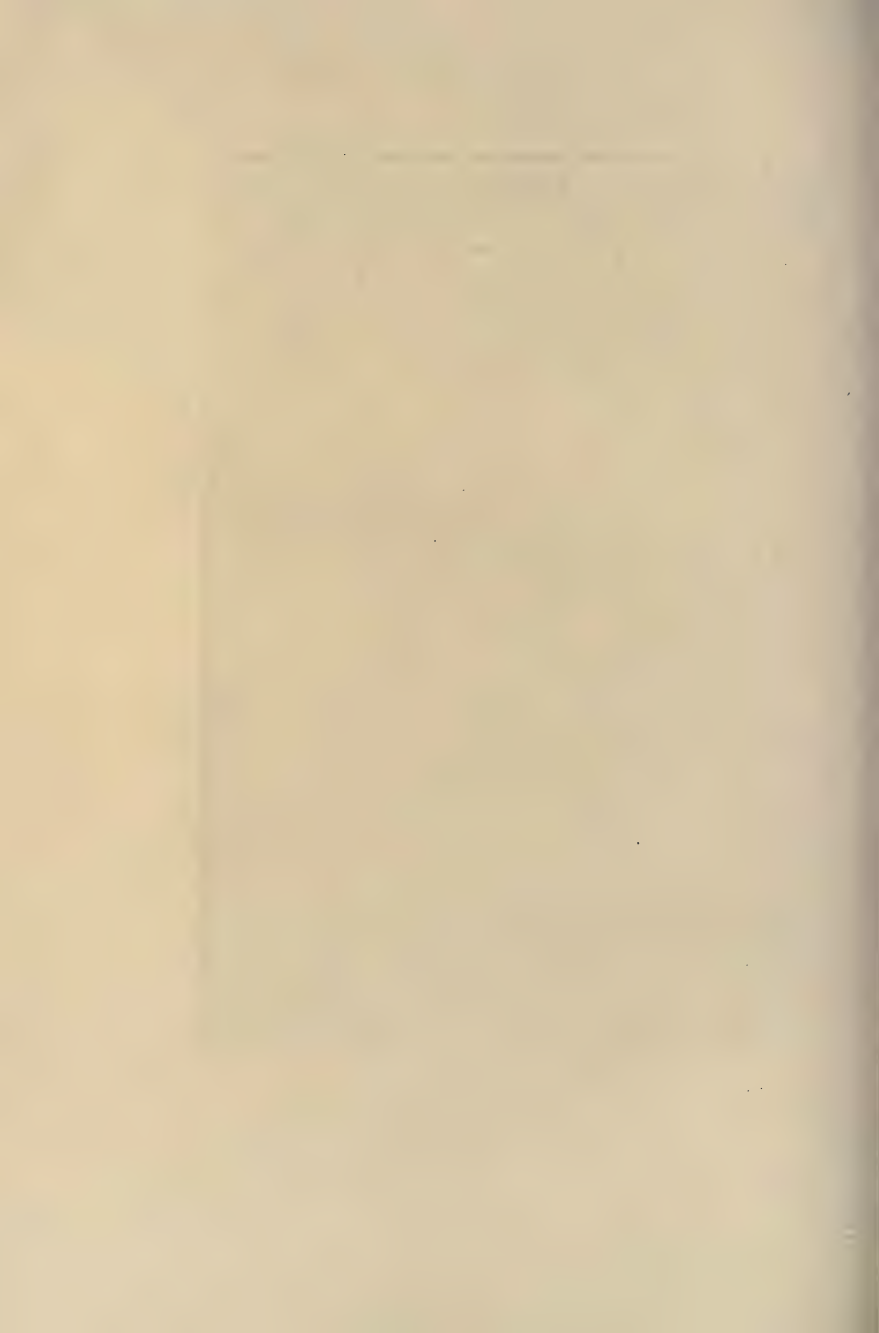


PLATE XLIII. LA GARDEUSE DE CHEVRES (THE GOATHERD)

TO the same series belongs this graceful, tender group, in which, slightly modified, we recognize two of the figures of the Rouen fresco. The young mother pulling down a branch of an apple-tree for her child has here become a goatherd, a pure and beautiful figure in spite of her wretched clothes; her back is towards us and she is holding up the child's hand to the fruit.

It was a rest for Puvis between two long pieces of work, to paint these little pictures in which there seems to be a relaxation of his style. "Always 'grand operas!'" he said once. "When will they let me sing a simple song?" But he was the last to grant himself the luxury of such laborious rest, and it needed all the friendly insistence of M. Durand Ruel to bring him to it.

Towards the end of his over-busy days he would banish fatigue with one of those jests which his pupils still love to remember: "I've had enough of women carrying lyres. When will they let me paint a scavenger!"

It is amusing to think what the æsthetes who were overwhelming the master with their happy eulogies would have made of such disrespectful remarks. Would his name have been inscribed among the spiritual patrons of the various "æsthetic movements" which were destined to "kindle the Holy Grail of the faithful beating of our hearts," to realize the "Arcana of the Visionary; attraction being proportionate to destiny," to perfect "Subtlety, the third orthodoxy," and to realize the other no less important tasks to which we were bidden at that time by M. Joséphin Péladan, an

erudite writer and a subtle critic, who was also " by the divine pity and the assent of his brothers, grand master of the ' Rose † Croix ' of the Temple and the Grail, in Roman Catholic Communion with Joseph of Arimathæa, Hugues de Paiens and Dante " ?

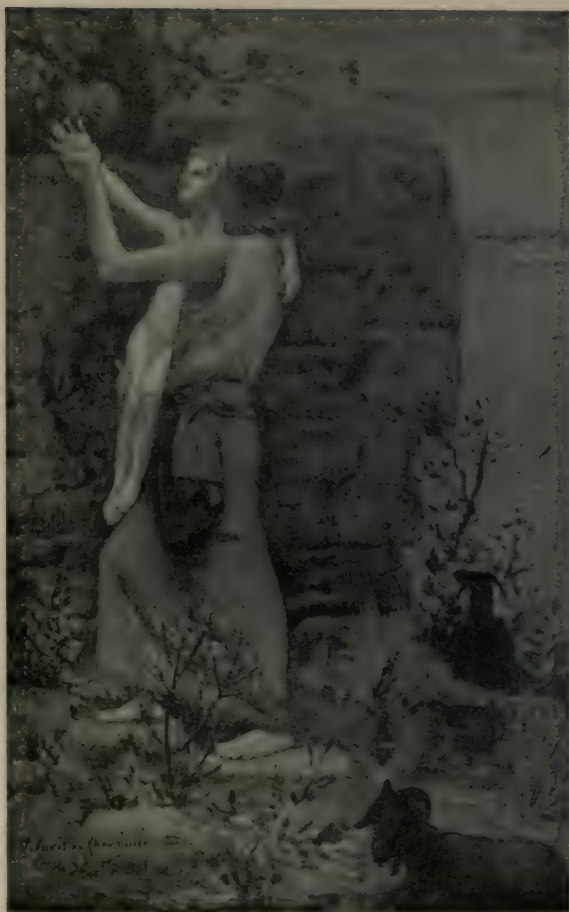
Would he have inspired verses like those of which a whole volume was to be composed, the most disturbing of which is not perhaps this sonnet by Mallarmé:

Toute aurore même gourde
A crisper un poing obscur
Contre des clarions d'azur
Embouchés par cette sourde
A le pâtre avec le gourde
Jointe au bâton frappant dur
Le long de son pas futur
Tant que la source ample sourde

Par avance ainsi tu vis
O solitaire Puvis
De Chavannes
Jamais seul

De conduire le temps boire
A la nymphe sans linceul
Que lui découvre ta gloire.

" There is never a piece of lunacy published but it is sent to me as its patron as of right," said the artist resignedly in 1896.



XLIII. LA GARDEUSE DE CHEVRES. (The Goatherd.)

PLATE XLIV. LE MODELE (PASTEL)

"**I** AM writing to you from Neuilly where I am waiting for a model who, apparently, is not coming, and I am torn between the desire to be free for the day and regret at having to waste it.

"Ever since I have been painting, and that is a long time, I always suffer such painful moments in the face of Nature and then I cannot tear myself away."

This feeling of apprehension, this passing uneasiness on first facing his model, which the artist confesses in a letter written in 1895, must be remembered because it brings us to one of the most delicate points in considering Puvis and his work. If he was afraid of direct study from nature, it was not—need it be repeated?—because he could not copy what he saw as well as any other artist. But he had not the support of the conviction—the motive force of the realists—that it is enough to copy and that Nature is always beautiful in any circumstances. Like his great predecessor, Delacroix, who records the same feeling in twenty passages in his Diary, he was afraid of being led away from his object by the pursuit of the thousand useless accidents presented by reality. "The model" wrote Delacroix, "draws everything into itself, and there is nothing left of the painter."

Now from beginning to end of Puvis's work, to which forty years of unceasing toil were devoted, through all the changes in subject and handling, beneath the sometimes complicated scaffolding of the allegories, always there is materialized beneath eternally fresh forms a vision of a world in which everything should be noble, calm, radiant in the most serene atmosphere, pure as the most limpid water, comforting as the softest light. And

it is comprehensible that he should approach his models fearfully when the first contact with them seems brutal to eyes less prepared than his, and, in his case, he was not concerned only with seeing what reality could give him but also with finding fresh nourishment for his eternal obsession.

What places Puvis high above the mystics, symbolists and Pre-Raphaelites with whom he has so often been confused, is that he has never stepped back or been biassed in this struggle with Nature. His solution is a painter's solution. He did not make any arbitrary assumption in reducing outline and modelling to their simplest expression, or orchestrating his bright colours in broad vivid masses. That and the air and light which bathe the body and shade off the accessory details have progressively given up the secret of it to the seeing eye.



XLIV. LE MODÈLE : PASTEL. (The Model.)

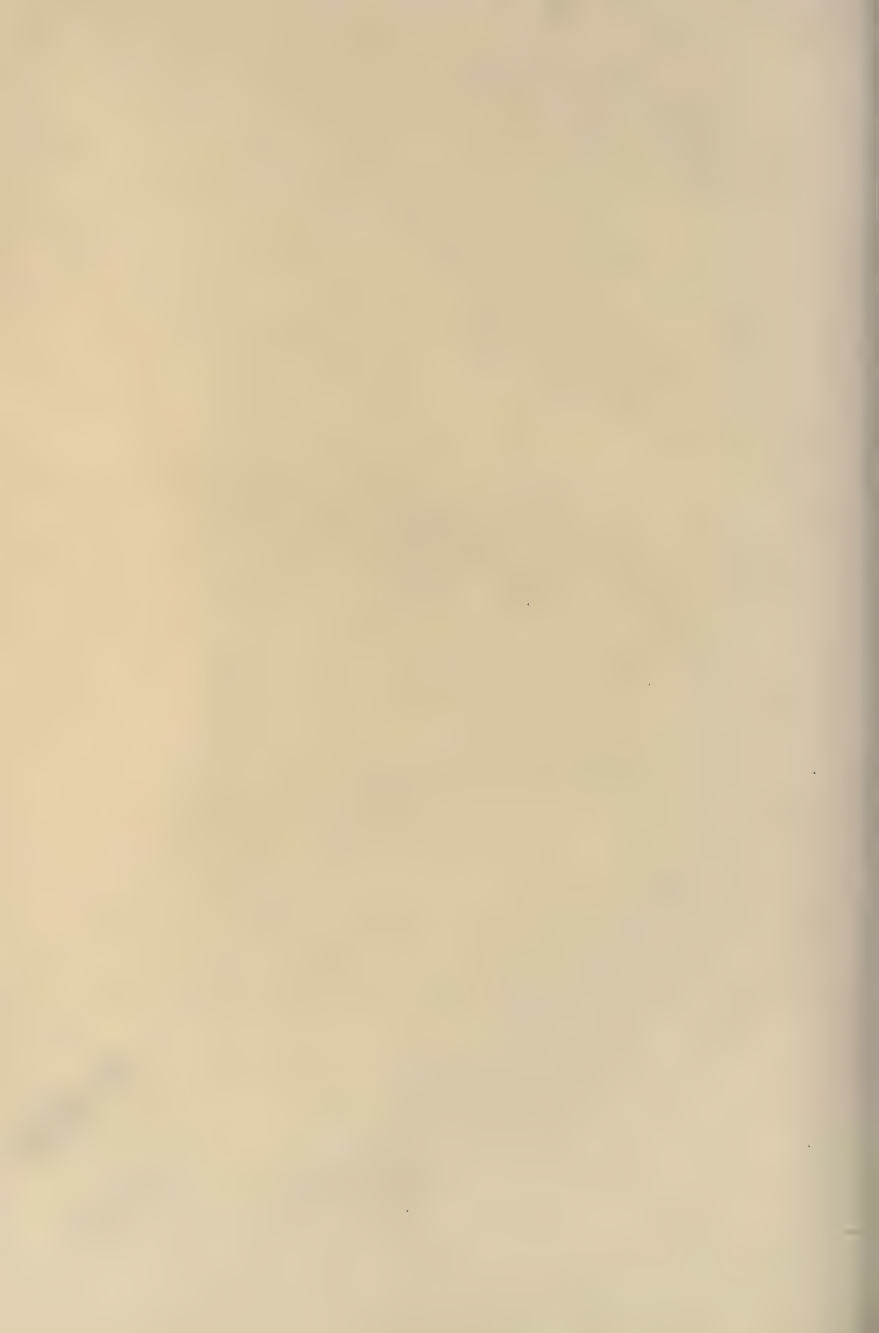


PLATE XLV. L'ETE (SUMMER)

PUVIS DE CHAVANNES was now at the head of a group of artists who serve to mark a transitional stage between the "officials" who are housed in the Champs Elysées, and the painters of the "vanguard" who were soon to found the Salon of the Independents and the Autumn Salon. The "Société Nationale des Beaux Arts," which held its sittings in the Champ de Mars between the two Universal Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900, unanimously elected him President on the death of Meissonier in 1891. Soon in 1895 all the artists and writers of Paris were to unite in a great banquet to celebrate the master's seventieth birthday. It was at this time that he undertook a new decorative series for the "Hôtel de Ville" of Paris.

For the first gallery of the reception rooms Puvis painted two large pictures, "L'Eté" (exhibited in 1891) and "L'Hiver" (exhibited in 1892); then on four jambs he painted figures connected with the two main frescoes; a reaper, a binder, a wood-cutter and a scarecrow.

"Here," said Edouard Rod of "L'Eté," "is the master of the older generation who has had the most considerable influence on the present generation. . . . The poet in him has never found a more complete or more absolute expression of his idea than in this great panel. . . . His creative hand has suffused the whole picture with a burning light which is implacable in its unity, and under it is a stretch of blue water with purple shadows, a pond and meadows of a tender green broken by the darker green of the clumps of trees, all shut in by a distant line of undulating hills. In the different planes of the vast landscape are groups of figures representing the

divers labours of the season; women bathing in the foreground; further off a fisherman casting his nets; then a mother, under a bush, suckling her child, then hay-makers piling the hay on a great cart. It is permissible to prefer some other picture by this master, as, for instance, the 'Bois Sacré,' to this sunny, almost overwhelmingly majestic scene, as we may prefer the fresh coolness of shadow to the dazzling heat of the sun; but it is impossible to imagine a more robust, more united, more communicative picture, and it is more: it is an harmonious poem."



XLV. L'ÉTÉ. (Summer.)



PLATE XLVI. L'HIVER (WINTER)

MANY ingenious explanations have been put forward for the artist's choice of subject for his decoration of a municipal room. But we may legitimately believe that his reason merely was that it gave him pleasure, after having so often expressed the softness of spring and autumn to attempt new poems of the extreme seasons. These pictures would have been in place anywhere.

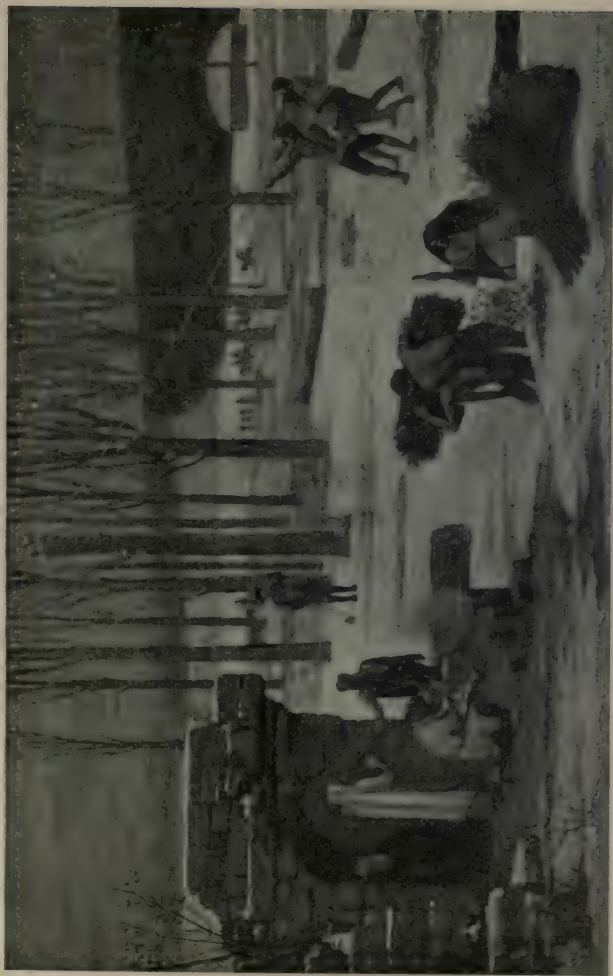
"L'Eté" and "L'Hiver" were received, in the Salons of 1892 and 1893, with the admiration due to a master who had lost none of his power. But precisely because he was not the man to confine himself to a formula he found once more that he had astonished the critics and gone too far for a portion of his public.

In the Salons of 1893 and 1894 appeared the pictures which were to complete the decoration of the Hôtel de Ville and occupy the space above the great staircase left vacant by the death of Baudry and Delaunay. There are a dozen tympana, jambs and arches, all chased with truly municipal mouldings, the disposition of which is so complicated as to defy all intelligible description. Puvis used them to personify the virtues of Paris: Patriotism, Charity, Artistic Ardour, Study, Wit, Fantasy, Beauty, Intrepidity, Worship of the Past, Industry, Urbanity and Poetry. Above all is a great ceiling-painting: "Victor Hugo offrant sa Lyre à la Ville de Paris."

Puvis had a horror of the ceilings, and the broken surfaces which were given to him in addition did not add to his pleasure in the work. At the outset he wrote: "I am still struggling with my staircase—devil take it! It will be

slow going until the day when I am broken in to this kind of work and can speak without stammering."

The necessity of getting the better of such blatant surroundings no doubt hastened the evolution which had already begun to appear in his work, and was now aided by the parallel evolution of French painting. If, for instance, we compare the great fresco of the Sorbonne with the almost monochrome tapestry of the "Ave Picardia" or the "Ludus" at Amiens, and see the luminous masses of paint singing the most penetrating and richly ordered colour symphonies, we shall find that grey plays a less and less necessary part in the artist's scheme. That lovely veil of mist is suddenly rent asunder in the Hôtel de Ville, where purples, yellows, and especially blues, the stained-glass blue that Puvis seemed to be preparing and holding in reserve for thirty years, are brought into the purest light. It would be unfair to the picture and would seem to confirm the critics were we to suffer its translation by photography and printer's ink. The allegory is not particularly interesting, but these pictures must be seen in their places to gain any complete idea of the colourist's and decorator's skill.



XLVI. L'HIVER (Winter.)

PLATE XLVII. LES MUSES INSPIRATRICES (THE
INSPIRING MUSES)

IN 1891 the Council of the Trustees of the Public Library in Boston asked Puvis to decorate the entrance hall of the building. The artist hesitated for a long time about undertaking a considerable piece of work for a building he had never seen and probably never would see.

"The offer does not tempt me," he wrote, "and I want rest, I mean rest made delightful with many pictures in which I can give rein to my fancy." The amiable tenacity of the Americans overcame his hesitation: "The Boston architect," he wrote, the following year, "has sent me an ambassador with these instructions: absolute submission to my wishes, perfect liberty for myself—and all my most unassailable objections have been responded to with such a masterful desire to overcome them that a blunt refusal seemed absolutely brutal.

"What can one tell a man who says he will wait ten years or more if necessary, or as long as I please! . . . It was no good my pointing to my white beard. On Wednesday morning I am to see a reduced plaster model of the building—made expressly for me. I shall have to think it over."

The work was begun in 1894: "Boston is progressing slowly in the dense heat of Neuilly," wrote the artist. "September will probably see it finished; thus the result of three years of my life will vanish over the ocean. Never again shall I undertake such a task. I am like a father whose daughter² has gone into a convent."

The central picture: "Les Muses Inspiratrices acclamant le Génie Messager de Lumière," half of which is here

reproduced, was exhibited in the Champ de Mars in 1895. Eight other panels, the first five of which were exhibited in 1896, personified "Astronomy" (Chaldean shepherds interrogating the stars), "Bucolic Poetry" (Virgil sitting by a row of bee-hives near a blue lake), "Epic Poetry" (Homer with the Iliad and the Odyssey), "History" (Melpomene examining some ruins), "Chemistry" (the earth revealing its mysteries), "Physics" (good and bad news gliding over telegraph wires). But the artist's ingenious handling of his subject is the least merit of this series which he conceived as a brilliant symphony, in harmony with its rich setting of coloured marbles of which he always had samples by his side as he worked. It was apparently a revelation, even for those who knew his other decorations in Paris, to see these pictures in place at Boston. As he foresaw, the artist never had that joy himself. One of his pupils, M. Victor Koos, was commissioned to see his master's work installed.



XLVII. LES MUSES INSPIRATRICES. (The Inspiring Muses.)

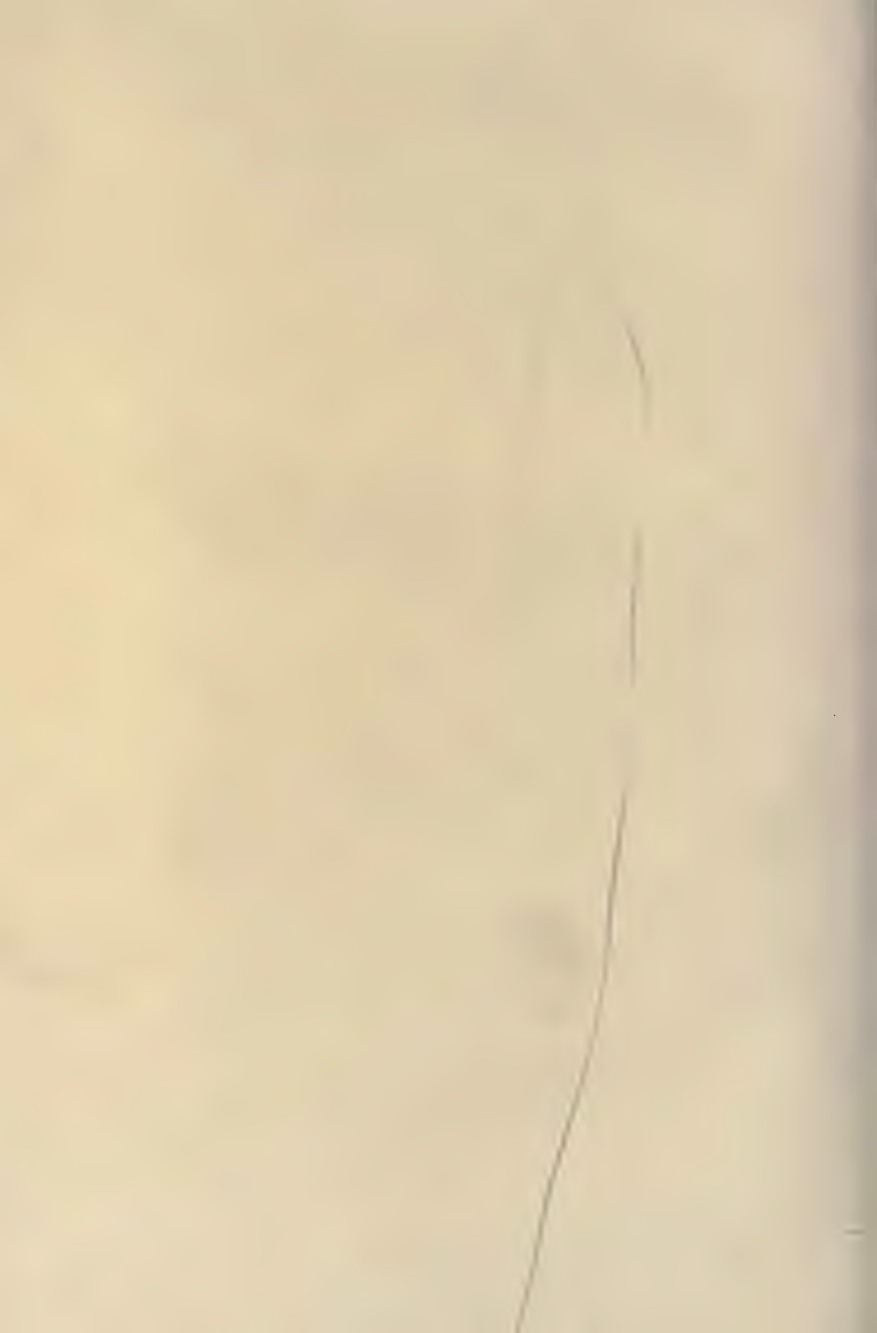


PLATE XLVIII. LA VEILLEE DE SAINTE GENEVIEVE (THE VIGIL OF SAINT GENEVIEVE)

IN 1896, Meissonier having died without having carried out his share in the decoration of the Panthéon, the administration offered Puvis the vacant place. He joyfully accepted the opportunity of continuing the story of the saint which he had begun twenty years before at the other end of the building. "I shall tackle the Panthéon," he wrote to a friend, "when I have finished with the Hôtel de Ville. It shall be my last will and testament."

Like the first series, this occupies four intercolumniations. In the first three, as a triptych, a procession, coming from the gates of the town, is moving towards the fleet of the "Ravitaillement" (re-victualling). "In her ardent faith and charity, Geneviève, whom not the greatest dangers have been able to turn from her task brings food to Paris, besieged and threatened with famine." The fourth panel, which like a serene night comes as a close to a piece of work full of gentleness and satisfying quality, needs no other commentary than its beautiful legend: "Geneviève, sustained by her pious solicitude, watches over the sleeping city of Paris."

This series which has been reproduced thousands of times in engravings and photographs, took all Puvis's indomitable energy in its successful execution. He had to leave the frieze with which he intended to complete it as a charcoal drawing. He had to be assisted by one of his pupils, M. Victor Koos, in the painting of the pictures themselves. For some years past, Puvis, who in his maturity had hated to see any other man touch his pictures or even stretch his canvas, had allowed his

collaborators to play a more and more important part in his work. All of them declare proudly that they were only instruments as ductile as possible in the hands of the master and protest that their chief merit lies in their having spared him physical pain and trouble.

After the death of Mme Puvis de Chavannes the artist was only attached to life by the work in which she who was gone yet lived: "I have resumed my work," he wrote on September 10, "and I am dreaming of the day when I shall have finished my Panthéon series. It seems to me that then I shall have nothing to do but to lay me down and sleep.

"I am haunted by that feeling. There could be nothing more natural or more logical. I have worked hard and have the right to rest without fixing any definite period for it."

Every day the struggle against a growing state of weariness grew more painful. He was under no illusion about it. "Happily," he wrote on September 22, "my work is very little affected. It is all in good order. I shall leave nothing straggling behind me; that sustains and comforts me."

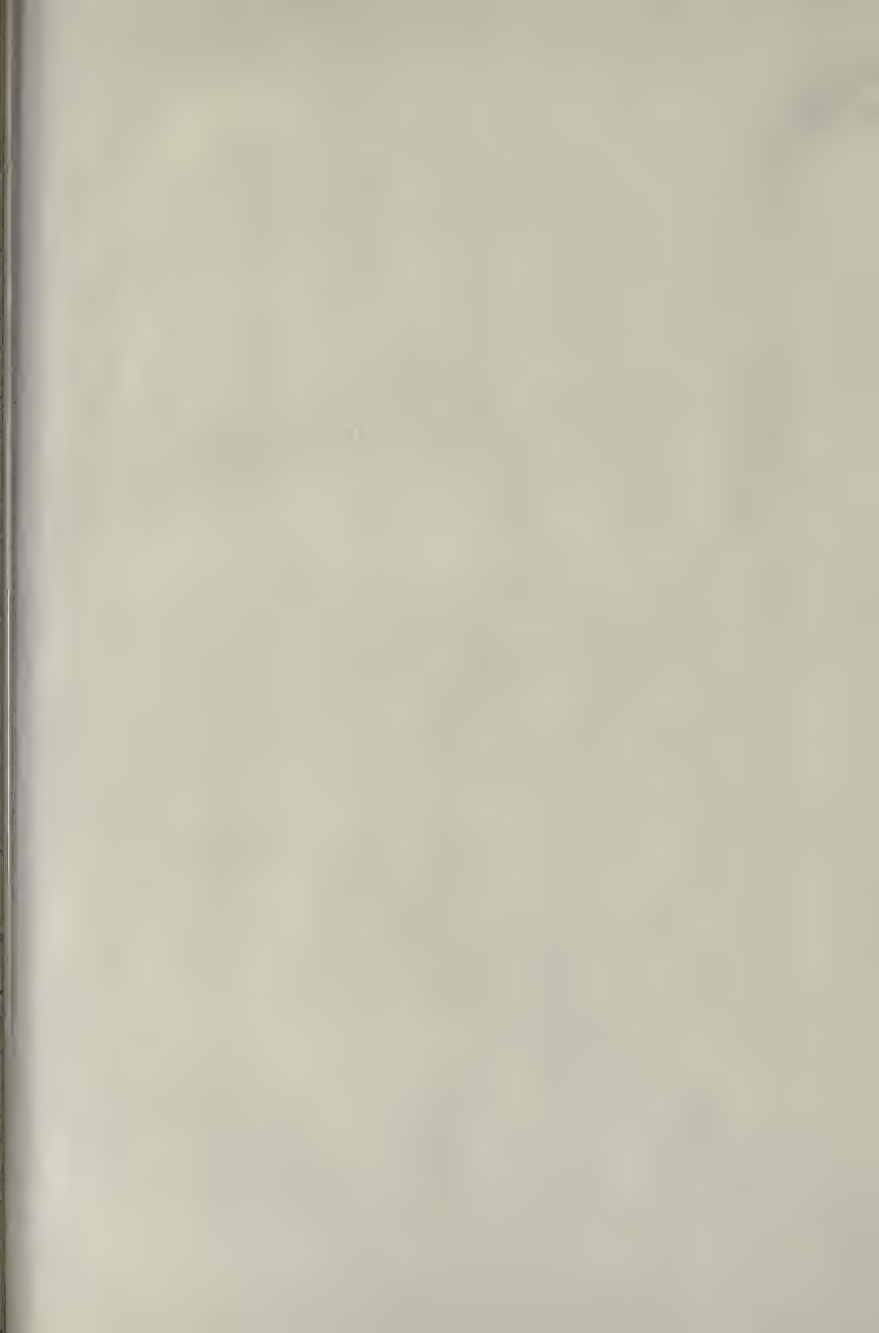
With his last reserve of strength exhausted Puvis de Chavannes only left his studio at Neuilly to take to his bed. When he died, at the age of seventy-four, on October 24, 1898, he left no "stragglers," and his "last will and testament" was finished, as he had wished.

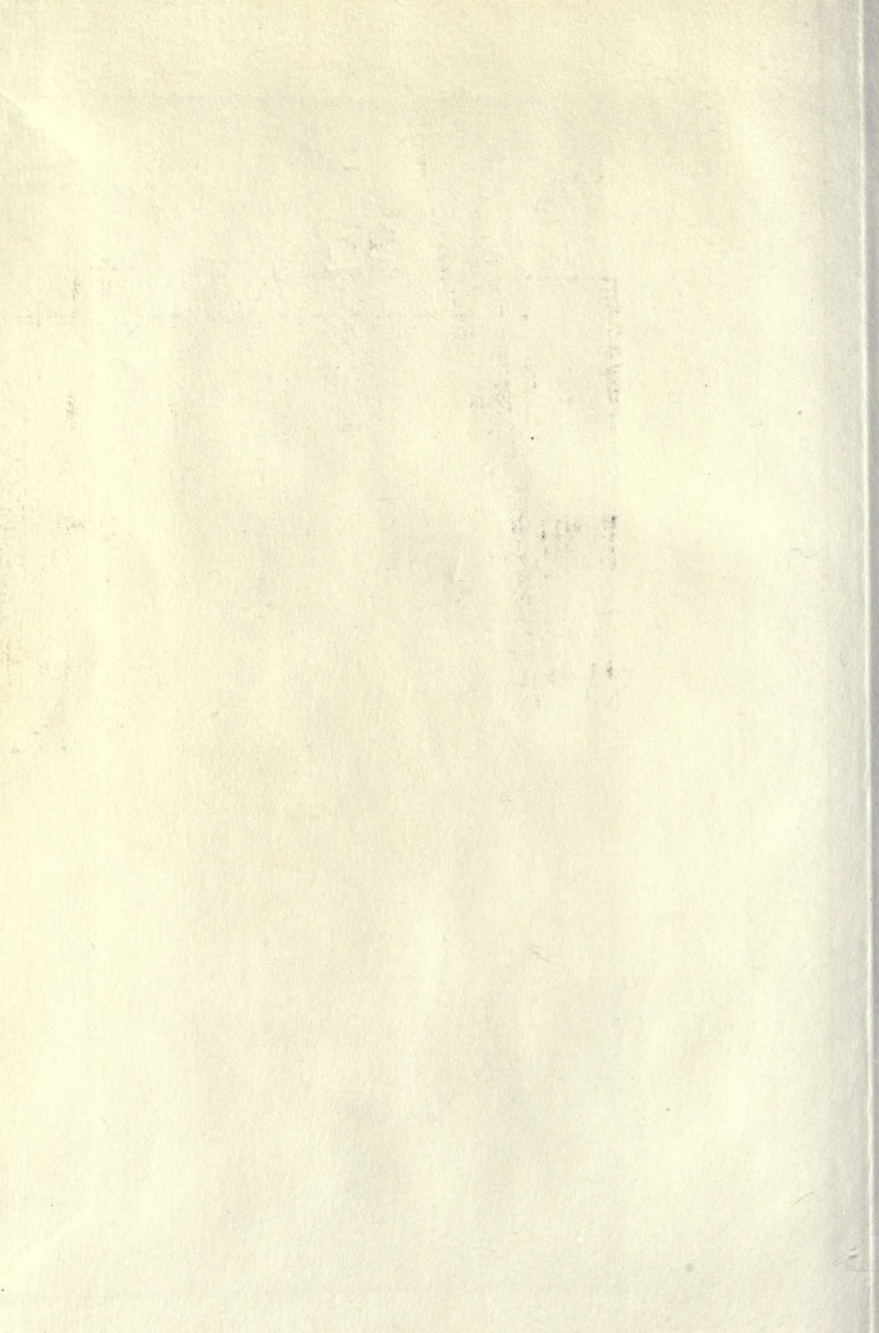
FINIS



XLVIII. LA VEILLÉE DE SAINTE GENEVIÈVE.
(The Vigil of Saint Genevieve.)







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